

# Chapter 18

## Women's Political Empowerment: Lessons for Subnational Levels of Government – Nepal, Pakistan, Rwanda, and Indonesia

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Political participation by women is central to development and the empowerment of all citizens. This chapter argues for the recognition of opportunities for women in leadership, political participation, and the strengthening of democracy at the level of subnational governments. A key reason for focusing on gender equity in political life is that women constitute slightly more than half of the world's population, and they contribute to the social and economic development of all societies to a greater degree than men because of their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. At the same time, their participation in formal political structures and processes, where they can contribute to decisions on the use of societal resources generated by both men and women, remains far below parity. Drawing examples from a range of national parliaments and countries, this chapter demonstrates lessons for increasing political participation by women in subnational governance.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

There has been an increasing focus on the role of women in parliaments, both national and subnational, in a global context (Ballington & Karam, 2005; Kurebwa, 2015; Sen 1999). In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against

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Women (CEDAW), instituted in 1981 and ratified by 189 states. The aims inherent in CEDAW were further promoted in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, of which Goal No. 3 (MDG3) is the key indicator in relation to the representation of women in the world's parliaments. The African Union is promoting gender parity by 2030, and Africa already has a significant number of countries where parliaments have elected more than 30% of women. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) collates statistics on women in national parliaments and shows that, as at February 1, 2016, the number of women in parliaments around the world range from the highest in Rwanda at 63.8%, to 0% in Haiti, Micronesia, Palau, Qatar, Tonga, Vanuatu, and Yemen (IPU, 2016). Countries lower down the IPU "league table" are interested in addressing gender representation in their governments.

This chapter draws upon work conducted by the authors in Nepal, Pakistan, and Indonesia, and further draws upon data from Rwanda for the purpose of comparison. In general, data are drawn from the national context, given that reliable and comparable statistics for subnational governments at this stage of development in these countries either do not exist, as they do not have elected subnational/local governments, or data are difficult to accurately source. This chapter focuses on the barriers faced by women and offers lessons to increase the political participation of women at the subnational level of government.

## **BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION**

The political participation of women can be measured in three different dimensions (Shankar, 2014): participation as a voter, participation as an elected representative, and participation in actual decision-making processes. Political participation in the democratic context has both *intrinsic* and *instrumental* value. To be prevented from participation in the political life of one's community defies the intrinsic value of human wellbeing and human rights (Bari, 2005; Bratton & Mattes, 2001; Sen, 1999). Instrumental value comes from the capacity for women to express claims or needs, given that women bring different conceptions to politics from the basis of their role in the domestic sphere (Bari, 2005; Bratton & Mattes, 2001; Sen, 1999). Thus, is women's participation in the democratic sphere intrinsic, as an end to itself, or is it valued as an instrument that can, say, improve living standards, or promote legislation that will advance women's position in their community?

While important, a focus on "numbers" and "percentages" of women in national and subnational governments leads to debates on the difference between *descriptive*, *symbolic*, and *substantive* representation (Kurebwa, 2015; Pitkin, 1967; emphasis added). It is evident that the provision of "numbers" constitutes the descriptive component of representation and, as will be shown, many of the increases in parliamentary representation by women have been as a result of the implementation of quotas. Symbolic representation may occur where women are elected to positions but have little capacity to influence decisions. However, substantive representation occurs when women have the agency to promote issues relevant to women (Bauer & Burnet, 2013; Pitkin, 1967).

An increase in women's participation can improve the public image and standing of political parties, and provide innovation and enhancement to a party's program and policy agenda. Further, electoral and campaign strategies may be strengthened by increased participation by women (OSCE, 2014). Inclusive parliaments can enhance legitimacy and representation, and the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments is frequently used as a measure of national progress towards gender equality (OSCE, 2014). A survey of members of parliaments carried out by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2008 found that more than 90% of respondents agreed that women brought different views, perspectives, and talents

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