

**FHSMUN XXIX**  
**UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT FUND FOR WOMEN**

**ACHIEVEING GENDER EQUALITY IN DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE**

“The Security Council...Urges Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict;”<sup>1</sup>

“Human development starts from the perspective of men and women as citizens with rights and opportunities for participation in the decision-making forums of their society – from the household and community to market place, the workplace, and in all levels of public assemblies and offices.”<sup>2</sup>

**Introduction**

The UN System is committed to achieving the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 but these goals cannot be fully achieved if women and girls do not achieve full equality with men and boys. Women and girls must be afforded the same opportunities as men and boys, including the rights to vote and hold public office. While considerable progress has been made worldwide in granting and protecting the rights of women to vote and hold public office, there are still countries that do not extend these rights to women; equally disturbing is the fact that in many countries that do not impose legal barriers to women’s participation in governance frequently discourage the full participation of women through cultural, financial, and political barriers. The delegates to UNIFEM must work in a collaborative fashion with related UN agencies, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as well as with national governments, non-governmental organizations (NGO’s), and relevant civil society representatives to eliminate the dangerous democratic deficit that the world confronts because of persistent gender equality in governance and decision-making.

**Scale of the Problem**

Statistical analyses of the representation of women in public office both reveal and obscure crucial information about the global democratic deficit. As of March 2006, women comprised approximately 16.4% of national legislators worldwide.<sup>3</sup> While this percentage has consistently increased over the past 25 years, glaring regional differences remain. Northern Europe consistently has the highest percentage of female legislators, with typically approximately 40% of all national legislators being females. Rwanda actually has the highest percentage of female legislators with 49% of all legislators being

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<sup>1</sup> Security Council resolution 1325 (S/RES/1325) October 31, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director of UNIFEM, “Women’s Participation and Leadership: Vital to Democratic Governance” Monterrey, Mexico January 13, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Soderlinh, “International Women’s Day: Handful of Nations Rejects Politics as Usual” March 6, 2006. Found at: [http://www.peacewomen.org/news/International/March06/Womens\\_participation.html](http://www.peacewomen.org/news/International/March06/Womens_participation.html)

women. Latin America and the Caribbean have also seen considerable and sustained progress in electing female legislators but many countries around the world still have very few to no female legislators. While the Middle East consistently has had the lowest percentage of female legislators of the different regions of the world, delegates and analysts need to avoid over generalizing; Iraq's current parliament has a higher percentage of female legislators than Canada, the United States, or France; Israel and Turkey have both had female presidents or prime ministers. Electing more women to national legislatures and parliaments is absolutely essential to addressing the democratic deficit but it cannot be seen as the only change needed. Noeleen Heyzer, the Executive Director of UNIFEM, noted that "increasing women's share of seats in parliament is not a panacea. It can only level the playing field on which women battle for equality."<sup>4</sup> A related crucial component that must be addressed is the number of women who become judges or high-level civil servants within their respective societies. Greater participation by women in these two key areas of governance is absolutely essential to ensure that the laws are administered and enforced equally for both men and women.

### **Barriers to Women's Participation**

As more women are being elected to local and national offices, they need to join with men to remove the various barriers to achieving gender equality in democratic governance. Even when women are elected to legislative offices, in many societies, the "power of parliamentarians may be limited by national constitutions that give greater power to the executive; by the decisions of international investors or the conditions of international financial institutions such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund; or by the rules of international organizations such as the World Trade Organization."<sup>5</sup> With structural political barriers to gender equality democratic governance, politicians must seek to revise existing legislation that prevents women from voting, hold public office, or exercising true political power. In 2006, Kuwaiti women voted for the first time in history; replicating this success in other countries and regions of the world is critical to closing the current democratic gender deficit.

Cultural traditions that discriminate against women serving in government are extremely difficult to overcome. While these barriers to gender equality prevent societies from fully developing during peacetime, they can be truly debilitating in post-conflict situations. According to Muna Ndulo, "in post-conflict countries women are sometimes afraid to engage in political activity as a result of the misuse of power by the male dominated political parties."<sup>6</sup> Security Council resolution 1325 (S/RES/1325), which was passed in 2000, explicitly ties effective post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation to the full incorporation of women into all peace processes, especially the formal peace process. During the Taliban regime in Afghanistan from 1996-2001, Afghan women were

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<sup>4</sup> Noeleen Heyzer, "Women's Participation and Leadership: Vital to Democratic Governance" January 13, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Noeleen Heyzer, "Women's Participation and Leadership: Vital to Democratic Governance" January 13, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Muna Ndulo, "Constitutional Provisions and Enhancing Participation of Women in Elections" Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI) Expert Group Meeting EGM/ELEC/2004/EP.2 January 14, 2004 p. 5.

completely excluded from economic and political power. Six and a half years after the Taliban were chased out of Kabul and Kandahar, women's political rights are enshrined in the constitution and approximately 25% of all legislators in the national parliament are women. According to Soutik Bouwas, "the bad news is that the state cannot protect women and ensure that they can go about their work safely."<sup>7</sup> Cultural attitudes that lead to discrimination and violence against women only contribute to a persistent global democratic deficit that precludes long-term democratic and human development.

When societies perennially channel resources overwhelmingly towards men and boys and away from women and girls, these inequalities prevent societies from achieving their Millennium Development Goals (MDG) targets. UNIFEM and related bodies have consistently advocated that governments enact gender-responsive budgets where they analyze the distribution of public resources by gender and then revise their budgets to promote gender equality in the provision of government resources. Governments' commitments to equality are likely to be most truly reflected by their actions and their allocations of resources, not necessarily by lofty rhetoric.

### **The UN System and the International Community**

UNIFEM's crucial work in advancing the rights and status of women worldwide must be supplemented by complementary efforts by other UN agencies, international organizations, and civil society partners. "In Morocco, with UNIFEM support, women successfully advocated for the adoption of a quota, the first in the Arab World, contributing to 35 women winning seats in parliament, compared to only two in the previous legislature."<sup>8</sup> UNIFEM also partners closely with the UN General Assembly (UNGA), the Security Council (UNSC), UN Development Programme (UNDP), World Health Organization (WHO), the Commission on the Status of Women, the Division for the Advancement of Women, the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, the Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR), and various international financial institutions (IFI's), including the World Bank Group, to promote gender equality and to eliminate the global gender democracy deficit.

Eliminating barriers to women's full participation in politics and governance may also be accomplished through universal ratification and implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and through ensuring that all branches of the government, including the judicial branch, are made fully aware of the special needs of women and girls. One suggested remedy to overcome the structural obstacles posed by attitudinal barriers to women serving in public office is for governments to impose quotas that mandate that a minimum of 20%-30% of all legislative candidates must be female. In many societies, analysts and observers praise these quotas for increasing the overall participation women in the electoral process and with bringing far more women into the government quickly. In December 2005, the

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<sup>7</sup> Soutik Bouwas, "Women under siege in Afghanistan" *BBC News* June 20, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Noeleen Heyzer, "Women's Participation and Leadership: Vital to Democratic Governance" January 13, 2004.

Expert Group on Democratic Governance met in Arusha, Tanzania to analyze and enumerate ways in which gender equality in democratic governance could be more rapidly achieved in Africa. One of their key recommendations was that governments and the international community need to “ensure gender balance in all bodies created as part of the design or implementation of the constitutional, political, legislative and electoral laws and regulations; to that end, special measures, including affirmative action to advance the rights of women, should be explored.”<sup>9</sup>

Non-governmental organizations (NGO’s), including well-known human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, are critical to ensuring that governments fulfill their promises and responsibilities. The UN System has consistently strengthened its working relationships with NGO’s and encouraged member states to do so as well, especially in countries where state capacity may be particularly limited. In just one example of the need for increased NGO participation in achieving gender equality in democratic governance, as well as the need for resources for these NGO’s, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) teamed up with local NGO’s in Mali to increase the political participation of Malian women. The reason for this was that “while working with Malian women’s organizations, USAID discovered that they tend to score higher on the internal democracy and sound management indices than groups with mixed gender membership, while tending to contact Malian government officials less frequently. When they do contact Malian government officials, women’s groups are less successful at influencing decisions than the mixed gender groups.”<sup>10</sup> Member states need to focus on the positive interactions and cooperation possible when working constructively with NGO’s, instead of reacting negatively and assuming that NGO’s are strictly seeking to confront governments.

### **The Roles of Men and Boys in Achieving Gender Equality in Democratic Governance**

Without the continued cooperation of men and boys, gender equality will never be reached, especially when men traditionally dominate the world’s various systems of government. During the Forty-eighth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, William O’Dea, Minister of State for the Irish Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, argued that “the achievement of gender equality was now clearly seen as the responsibility of society as a whole, which needed to fully engage men as well as women.”<sup>11</sup> Male legislators need to effectively engage their female counterparts as well as women’s organizations to ensure that they consider the various gender dimensions of proposed legislation and that their budgets become more gender-responsive in nature. Men and boys also need to ensure that they become aware of the very real concerns that women and girls have and educate themselves about problems that have very serious

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<sup>9</sup> “Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Democratic Governance: Strategies for Greater Participation of Women” Arusha, Tanzania December 6-8, 2005, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> USAID-Mali Democratic Governance Strategic Objective (DGSO).  
Found at: <http://www.h-net.org/~dientais/project/womenindg.html>

<sup>11</sup> Commission on the Status of Women, “Role of Men, Boys in Achieving Gender Equality”  
Press Release WOM/1435 January 3, 2004.

gender dimensions, including maternal health and mortality, HIV/AIDS, and sexual harassment. Highly chauvinistic attitudes must also be addressed in a comprehensive manner, including through the revision of existing school curricula and systematic efforts to eliminate gender biases in education, employment, and the provision of social services.

## **Conclusion**

The Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) currently guide the actions and thinking of the entire UN System. Given the interrelated nature of the MDG's, it is impossible for countries and the international community to achieve their MDG targets without achieving gender equality, including in governance. National governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGO's), and relevant civil society partners must work collaboratively to eliminate the persistent global gender democracy deficit. Within the context of this multistakeholder dialogue on achieving gender equality in democratic governance, UNIFEM occupies a truly central place and the delegates to UNIFEM must seek to use its resources and institutional credibility to forge durable and comprehensive solutions.

## **Guiding Questions**

What is the current percentage of female legislators, judges, and high-level public servants in your country? What efforts or initiatives have your country undertaken to increase these percentages and overall numbers? Has your country ever implemented a quota for the minimum percentage of candidates and/or elected officials that are female? If so, how well is that system working?

How effectively is your country working with UNIFEM, related international agencies and organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGO's) to increase women's overall political participation and to achieve gender equality in democratic governance?

How are men and boys contributing to achieving gender equality within your country? How can your country and the international community as a whole expand and enhance the roles of men and boys in achieving gender equality in democratic governance?