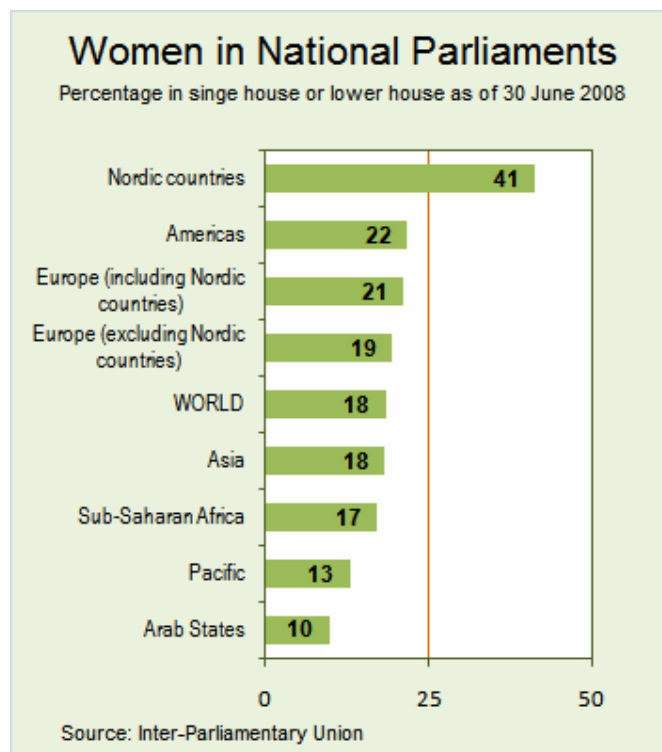




WOMEN AND DEMOCRACY

From women's epic struggles to obtain the vote to the current concerted effort in countries around the world to introduce quotas and reservations to increase the numbers of women elected representatives, women have always had a strong stake in democracy. They have recognized that democratic participation is the key means by which women's interests can be represented and receive a socially legitimate and sustainable policy response. If women need democracy, democracy also needs women.

The strikingly low numbers of women in public office, currently at a global average of just 16.7% in national assemblies, has been acknowledged as a deficit that must be redressed. Women's increased participation at all levels of democratic governance - from the local to the national and regional - diversifies the character of democratic assemblies and enables public decision-making to respond to citizens' needs that may have been neglected in the past.



Elections and meaningful participation of women in politics

Around the world, the United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM) supports efforts to increase the share of women that are elected into office. It also seeks to build women's capacity as effective legislators once elected. However, the challenge of securing gender equality in political participation goes beyond achieving better quantitative ratios between men and women during an election year. UNIFEM therefore also supports initiatives to increase women's political effectiveness before and after elections. During elections, UNIFEM

works to build the capacity of women candidates and seeks to build a gender-sensitive approach in key institutions working in the context of elections, such as electoral commissions and the media. For example, in Sierra Leone in 2007, UNIFEM provided support to organizations seeking to ensure that the media code of conduct for the election incorporated strong anti-discrimination elements to ensure that women candidates received the same amount and quality of coverage as



men. UNIFEM has also worked extensively on upcoming or recent elections in Burundi, Cambodia, Kenya, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone.

Before elections, UNIFEM works with political parties encouraging the nomination of women leaders as candidates for office. It also supports efforts to enable political parties to incorporate national priorities on gender equality in their campaign platforms and legislative agendas, and to nominate strong gender equality advocates as candidates for office. After elections, UNIFEM seeks to build the capacity of voters to demand gender equality policies of all elected officials, an approach currently being piloted in Nepal and Kenya, with 'Women's Election Watch' groups tracking and assessing the legislative performance of politicians.

Constituency building and civic education

One critical element for ensuring effective and meaningful participation of women in politics is to develop a "gender equality constituency." For this reason, UNIFEM has supported initiatives in Cambodia, Haiti, Nepal and Nigeria aimed at building nationally agreed political agendas for gender equality and, in the context of elections, supporting the dissemination of adequate voter information including gender-sensitive assessments of political party platforms. In addition, UNIFEM has worked alongside ministries of women's affairs in Afghanistan, Algeria, Argentina, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ecuador, Jamaica, Montenegro, Morocco, Paraguay, Serbia, South Africa, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe, and the occupied Palestinian territory, to help resolve issues such as ambiguities about the role of these ministries, and inadequate positioning, staffing, and resources.

Democratic governance and accountability

UNIFEM also engages in various projects aimed at improving gender-sensitive democratic governance and improved accountability for women. For example, in Argentina, UNIFEM is partnering with the *Fundación Mujeres en Igualdad* (an UNDEF grantee) on a project that seeks to organize and mobilize women to promote transparency and promote citizens' right of access to information. This year, UNIFEM is also partnering with UNDP and the non-governmental organization, Gender at Work, to develop a five-year global initiative aimed at improving the quality of governance from the perspective of women's capacity to access public services, and to demand accountability for poor quality services or failures to deliver. The programme will be implemented in six to ten countries.

Gender-sensitive legislation and policies

UNIFEM seeks to aid, consult with, and support developing democracies in the enactment of gender-sensitive legislation and policies, primarily dealing with gender equality in law and governance, violence against women, and health and poverty. UNIFEM pays particular attention to the removal of discriminatory provisions from existing legislation and policies, as well as the



inclusion of gender equality provisions in line with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

During 2006, UNIFEM supported the inclusion of gender equality provisions in the development of new constitutions in Bolivia, Iraq, Montenegro, and Thailand, and in the interim constitutions of Nepal and Sudan. UNIFEM also supported the removal of discriminatory provisions from legislation and policies in Burundi, Ecuador, Liberia and Nepal, and provided technical and financial support to strengthen women's rights and gender equality laws elsewhere. Some important changes achieved as a result include the criminalization of all forms of sexual harassment and the establishment of daughters' right to inherit family land in Nepal, and the removal of discriminatory provisions in HIV/AIDS law in Ecuador.

Women's participation in peace building processes

UNIFEM works to ensure that women participate in peace negotiations and peace-building processes, and to ensure that emergency, transitional, recovery, and peace consolidation efforts address women's needs in post-conflict countries and fragile states. Priority areas include supporting engagement in electoral processes, capacity-building of national women's machinery and identifying and supporting practical and effective forms of protection for women in conflict situations.

In Burundi, UNIFEM not only arranged for women to participate as observers in the Arusha talks, but subsequently supported women to ensure a constitutional quota for women's political participation. In Sudan, UNIFEM supported women's access to the first and third donor consortiums to ensure that women's views were heard on the implementation of the comprehensive peace agreement. In Liberia, UNIFEM encouraged voter registration for women, supporting organizations that provided physical transportation for those who lived far from polling stations or who could not, for other reasons, register to vote.

Gender and accountability: Who answers to women?

UNIFEM's biennial flagship report, *Progress of the World's Women*, to be launched in mid-September 2008, will address a subject central to democracy -- accountability. Its framework for understanding accountability challenges from a gender perspective shows how gender biases can distort the functioning of oversight institutions in ways that prevent proper accountability for abuses of women's rights. It sets out an agenda for institutional reform to ensure accountability to women in the arenas of political competition, economic activity, judicial review, service delivery, and in the design and delivery of international aid. The report shows that women around the world have been changing the ways that we understand and build democratic accountability.

