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MYANMAR MULTIPARTY DEMOCRACY PROGRAMME
QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ON PARTY DEVELOPMENT

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WOMEN IN POLITICS

BACKGROUND

In many countries the participation of women in politics is low due to a number of factors, including patriarchal societal and cultural norms, women's relative lack of financial resources to run campaigns, political parties and other political institutions that discriminate against women, legal and electoral systems that do not provide a conducive environment for women's participation, and lack of security for women to participate in politics. In countries with severe forms of these challenges, women constitute less than 10% of the Parliament, and occupy few prominent leadership positions.

However, in other countries, concerted efforts and affirmative action have greatly improved the level of participation in politics and the impact of women's participation on gender equality. A diverse range of countries including Rwanda, Sweden, Nicaragua, Senegal, South Africa, and Ecuador have all achieved representation levels of at least 40% women in their national parliaments. Through extensive campaigns to promote gender equality and the strategic use of proportional representation electoral systems, gender based quotas, social welfare systems that ease the domestic burdens on women, and other significant reforms, women have taken increasing leadership positions in Parliament. Once present in Parliament in significant numbers, women have taken initiatives to improve legislation and budgeting to reflect gender equality.

Involving women in local politics is also essential for promoting their economic and political advancement. Yet numerous challenges impede women's participation as elected representatives at the local level. Even in Denmark, where women's participation in Parliament is at a high level, women make up only 30% of elected councilors at the municipal level. In the best case, however, women's participation as local elected councilors provides them with invaluable experience in building their careers as political leaders. It also provides an additional platform for getting gender issues onto the agenda, especially to make sure that resources reach women through local service delivery.

In Myanmar, limited political space under military rule provided few options for women's participation in politics. Women's representation in Myanmar's Parliament is among the lowest in Southeast Asia, with women occupying only 6% of all elected seats in the National Assemblies. Although the number of women candidates will increase significantly in 2015, women currently occupy few significant positions of leadership in the current political dispensation. Myanmar's

All political parties and political members can forward queries or questions relating to the challenges of political parties to the Myanmar Multiparty Democracy Programme, and we will share information, manuals, training tools, guidelines, resource institutions and literature on the topics of interest.

Send requests to Country Coordinator Khin Thazin Myint at email: ktzm@dipd.dk

This knowledge facility is a living information resource for political parties in Myanmar. For more information visit the Myanmar page on www.dipd.dk and www.mynamarmultiparty.org

movement towards democratization, however, will provide considerably greater opportunities for women to participate in politics and serve as political leaders. A strategic set of reform initiatives can help women achieve significant political representation and enact legislation to improve the lives of Myanmar women throughout the country.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGAGING WOMEN IN POLITICS

There are a number of reasons why women's representation in politics is important. Women have a right to equal representation, according to basic principles of justice and human rights. Women's interests and experiences are often also distinct from men's, so representing those interests ensures that both men's and women's interests and needs are accommodated in political negotiation and decision-making. Core values of democracy, such as inclusiveness in representation, establish that a political system that excludes women cannot be considered as legitimate. There is a strong argument that excluding women from political representation does not make optimal use of women's talents in politics. Finally, women constitute half of the voters and political parties that take women's issues seriously and actively engage women are likely to fare better in elections.

One of the best statements in contextualizing the important of women's participation comes from the Beijing Platform, which declares "Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning" (Art. 183).

WHAT STRATEGIES CAN SUPPORT AN INCREASED REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS?

Rates of representation of women in national and sub-national parliaments vary considerably across countries. Traditionally representation of women has been highest among Nordic countries, but recently a number of countries in Africa have also implemented reforms that have led to a dramatic increase in women in Parliament in a short period of time. Some of the common strategies for increasing women's representation in politics include legal and political strategies, party-based strategies, and other strategies.

Legal and Political Strategies

Countries that adopt **proportional representation (PR) electoral systems** consistently outperform those with first past the post (FPTP) electoral systems. Looking at the top twenty countries for women's representation in Parliament, all employ either PR or mixed electoral systems. Through the mechanism of the party list, PR provides an opportunity for women to be allocated seats on the list by law or party initiative.

In countries where **quotas** for women's representation are sponsored by parties or required by law, higher levels of women's representation follow. These usually take the form of assigning women specific places on the party list of candidates in a PR system. The case of the Australian Labour Party is an example of how a quota for female candidates can be used in a first past the post electoral system, but is the exception rather than the rule for FPTP systems.

In countries with FPTP electoral systems, dedicating a certain number of **reserved seats for women** ensures a minimal level of women representation in parliaments. Uganda, for example, provides for one women representative for each district, and has achieved 35% representation of women in the Parliament. However, quotas are

also unpopular in some countries like Tanzania where men discriminate against women occupying reserved seats.

Party based strategies

To **ensure that women get nominated as candidates**, parties can structure the **nomination process** so that women sit on the nomination committee, and also carry out nomination in a way that provides transparent opportunities for women candidates rather than relying on the "old boys' network" common in many political parties. These could include rules on the constitution of the nomination committee, rules on who attends party conventions, and rules on how nomination committees receive and vet candidates.

Parties can also encourage women candidates by taking the initiative to **identify likely women candidates** and **providing them with capacity building opportunities** to prepare them for candidacy. As women may be more reluctant to stand as candidate due to a number of factors, proactive recruitment of female candidates will help increase the quantity of women candidates. Programmes to prepare and nurture these candidates will help increase the quality of women candidates and increase their chance of winning elections.

Another tool available to parties to increase the number of women candidates is to provide **financial support** for potential female candidates through reduction or elimination of nomination fees, and the provision of support for campaign fees and expenditures. Women candidates often have more limited resources than men, and reducing the financial barriers they face can help encourage them to compete and make their campaigns more effective.

Parties can also provide support for candidates and elected women representatives in other ways. **Mentoring programmes** that link aspiring and junior women representatives with senior women leaders can be a helpful way to build up the capacity and strategy of potential and serving women representatives to discharge their duties effectively and win elections in the future. DIPD mentoring programmes in Tanzania and Malawi have supported women to stand as candidates and initiate advocacy campaigns to increase gender equality.

Another potentially worthwhile initiative to boost women candidates and elected representatives is the creation of multiparty **networking** opportunities for women. The creation of networks of women politicians across parties can help provide mutual support and assistance to those women occupying parliamentary seats.

The organisation of **women's caucuses** in Parliament can help provide support for women in Parliament across party lines and also support women to pass gender-sensitive legislation and carry out gender-responsive budgeting in Parliament.

Supporting women in party activities and party leadership

Increased presence of women in party activities, and especially in party leadership, usually leads to increased number of women candidates representing the party.

Organising a **women's league, wing, or other forum** can provide an opportunity for women to participate and take party leadership roles. It also can provide a platform for proposing reforms to promote gender equality within the party.

Creating **rules, policies, and practices** that promote women's participation makes it easier for women to participate in party activities and leadership. These could include

a range of initiatives from quotas for women in party leadership and women's leagues, on the one hand, to policies prohibiting sexual harassment and measures to create women-friendly party offices, on the other.

Developing ways to attract and support **young women** such as providing opportunities like **mentoring**, cooperating with **gender-sensitive youth organisations**, **creating spaces** within parties where young women can voice their issues, and **reaching out** to young women through the organisation of events in schools, are options for increasing young women's participation.

Strategies at local level

Similar strategies as those to increase women's participation in national politics can work well for women in local politics, such as **quotas, reserved seats, and greater levels of party support for women candidates**. Social and economic empowerment for women at the community level, such as forms of **financial support, childcare support, and training opportunities**, can also help promote women's engagement in politics. Finally, patriarchal attitudes can hit particularly hard at the community level, so **changing attitudes and practices** that discriminate against or discourage women will have an important effect in creating an enabling environment for women politicians.

Linking with NGOs and women's movements

Promoting the representation of women in politics and legislation supporting gender equality is much easier for female politicians if they have support from a strong women's movement. To this, **building alliances and coalitions** with supportive organisations and movements can make a valuable contribution to achieving greater representation of women in politics and consideration of legislative reforms that can promote gender equality.

Case Studies

In **Nepal**, commitments to gender equality in the Constitution have supported women to campaign against discriminatory citizenship and property laws. They have also increased the participation of women in Parliament to 33%, making Nepal one of the parliaments in Asia with the highest level of women representation. Women have also worked together to campaign against gender based violence in Nepal. Through its DIPD-supported multiparty platform, the Joint Mechanism for Political Party Strengthening (JOMPOPS), six political parties in Nepal have cooperated to develop an action plan to reduce violence against women, and also carried out campaigns to ensure that the Constitutional review process provides commitments on women in politics.

In **South Africa**, changes in the Constitution and laws have provided the opportunity for women to occupy over 40% of seats in the Parliament. The shift to a proportional representation system provided an opportunity for greater representation of women. Introduction of party-based quotas have led to dramatically increased women representation in the South African parliament over a short period of time. The African National Congress, in particular, introduced a system of a "zebra list" quotas where 50% of the candidates on the party list are women. A strong women's movement has contributed to significant changes in the status of women in politics in just twenty years, with South Africa now equalling or surpassing most of the Scandinavian countries in terms of women's representation in Parliament. For example, the Women's National Coalition mobilized 2 million women to create a Charter for Women's Effective Equality that ensured that gender equality informed the constitution-making process. The

ANC Women's Charter, which called for women's equality, was also later incorporated into the country's constitution. The ANC Women's League also provided opportunities for women to participate in party activities at the grassroots and raise women's issues in the party. As a result of all these initiatives, the presence of women in key positions in Parliament has supported the passage of pieces of legislation intended to improve the lives of South African women.

SOURCES, WEBPAGES & LINKS

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