Why Elect More Women? Equity or Public Policy Shift?

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Only recently have significant numbers of women been elected to legislatures. Most gains are in countries with electoral systems where voters select a party; parties can easily include women on the party list. But in countries that use a "first-past-the-post" system with one elected member per electoral district, parties are more reluctant to field a woman as their only candidate for a particular seat. In such countries, active women's organizations play a major role in finding women candidates and expect that more women legislators will result in significant policy shifts. Does this result in more women-friendly bills? To answer this question, the article compares two disparate countries: Sweden and India. In Sweden, which has the second highest national percentage of female parliamentarians (47.3% in 2006), women's rights in work and welfare are exemplary. Yet feminists in that country have started a women's party, the Feminist Initiative, to change the patriarchal power order. In India, male dominance is mediated through caste/class/race hierarchies. While yet to be achieved at the federal level, the constitutional requirement that 33% of all seats in local councils be held by women is altering some policies.

The numbers of women elected to national and local legislatures around the world have dramatically increased in the last 25 years. Leaders of the organizations that led the struggle for greater representation expected a corresponding shift in policy, one that would bring greater gender equality in society and in the home. The apparent slowness of change has disappointed many activists, who argue that electing more women is not sufficient – more feminists must be elected. This debate is loudest in advanced industrial countries such as Sweden, where governments provide significant health and welfare programs.

What are feminist goals, and why is it so difficult to achieve them? Are they distinct from women-friendly policies? Have elected women, in fact, been able to affect certain types of issues? Or does their election simply reflect a greater acceptance of women as equal citizens?

The answers to these questions depend on many factors: the governmental structure, the electoral system, the political culture and the existence of any strong women's organization. What is clear is that electing more women to the legislature does make a difference. That difference varies by the degree of industrialization and the types of powers devolved to local councils.

This article illustrates the variety of goals sought by elected women by contrasting Sweden with India. Feminists in both countries have produced recent studies on the successes and disappointments that followed the introduction of electoral quotas for women in their countries. To set the context, the next sections present a global overview of the demand for women's electoral quotas and a brief description of the gendered institutions within which elected women must function.

Demand for quotas

For years after women were granted the right to vote, men continued to dominate elected assemblies. After World War II, much of the world focused on either reconstruction or development. In Europe, socialist governments provided both economic and social rights for women soon after the war; during the 1970s, many parties began to include women as candidates. Women in developing countries were more successful in achieving inclusion in economic development programs than in obtaining a share of political power. As the global women's movement matured, its earlier focus on economic benefits expanded to encompass the political sphere.

The sudden spurt in elected women since 1991 resulted from the rise of the global women's movement, which affected the world view of global leaders and shifted international norms. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, passed by the United Nations in 1979, called for gender equality in public life. The 1995 Platform for Action, adopted during the UN Fourth World Conference for Women in Beijing, set a target for women to hold 30% of all decision-making positions. While UN resolutions are not binding and cannot be enforced, such statements carry moral force that can be used by women's organizations to demand that more women be elected. To date, more than 40 countries have introduced either

quotas or reserved seats for women. These include constitutional quotas for national parliaments (e.g. Afghanistan, Argentina, France, Rwanda and Iraq), and/or electoral law quotas (e.g. Afghanistan, Belgium, China, Mexico and Iraq). Some have constitutional or legislative quotas at the sub-national level (e.g. Brazil, France, India, Pakistan and South Africa). Political parties in at least 50 countries have voluntarily included women on their lists (e.g. Australia, Belgium, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom). Where no special arrangements are made by law or party, the increased numbers of women legislators are generally the result of active women's organizations.[1]

Most gains have been achieved in countries with electoral systems that use a form of party list so that voters select a party, not an individual. The number of women winning through such lists depends on their placement on the list. Party bosses can manipulate the lists so that few women win. Many parties place women high on the list, and then jump over them after the election – as in an open list. And because the party selects the women candidates, critics complain of dominance by party leaders and their policies, which often sideline women's priorities. Sweden utilizes a closed list: women and men candidates alternate on the list and must be chosen in that order. Women currently hold 47.3% of the seats in Sweden's national parliament, the second-highest percentage of any country.[2] (See table.)

Providing seats for women when the electoral system is based on single-member constituencies is more complicated. In India, under this system, only 8.3% of the national parliamentarians are women. No country with this system has actually set aside seats for the national legislature that can only be contested by women, though both India and Bangladesh have introduced such a system at the local level. In Uganda, several wards are combined to allocate new seats for women, who contest them in a separate election. In Pakistan, each level of government has an additional list for women, from which winning candidates are allocated seats based on the votes obtained by parties in the general election. Many feel that creating separate constituencies for women puts them in a secondary position that limits their effectiveness.[3]

Women in National Parliaments, by Selected Countries

Rank	Country	Lower or Single House				Upper House or Senate			
		Election	Seats	Women	% W	Election	Seats	Women	% W
1	Rwanda	09 2003	80	39	**48.8**	09 2003	26	9	**34.6**
2	Sweden	09 2006	349	165	**47.3**	–	–	–	–
3	Finland	03 2007	200	84	**42.0**	–	–	–	–
4	Costa Rica	02 2006	57	22	**38.6**	–	–	–	–
5	Norway	09 2005	169	64	**37.9**	–	–	–	–
6	Denmark	02 2005	179	66	**36.9**	–	–	–	–
7	Netherlands	11 2006	150	55	**36.7**	06 2003	75	22	**29.3**
8	Cuba	01 2003	609	219	**36.0**	–	–	–	–
8	Spain	03 2004	350	126	**36.0**	03 2004	259	60	**23.2**
9	Argentina	10 2005	257	90	**35.0**	10 2005	72	31	**43.1**
10	Mozambique	12 2004	250	87	**34.8**	–	–	–	–
11	Belgium	05 2003	150	52	**34.7**	05 2003	71	27	**38.0**
12	Iceland	05 2003	63	21	**33.3**	–	–	–	–
33	Australia	10 2004	150	37	**24.7**	10 2004	76	27	**35.5**
49	Canada	01 2006	308	64	**20.8**	n/a	100	35	**35.0**
51	China	02 2003	2,980	604	**20.3**	–	–	–	–
54	U.K.	05 2005	646	127	**19.7**	n/a	751	142	**18.9**
70	U.S.A.	11 2006	435	71	**16.3**	11 2006	100	16	**16.0**
88	France	06 2002	574	70	**12.2**	09 2004	331	56	**16.9**
100	Russia	12 2003	447	44	**9.8**	n/a	178	6	**3.4**
110	India	04 2004	545	45	**8.3**	07 2006	242	26	**10.7**

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm), on the basis of information provided by national parliaments

Gendered institutions

Once women have been elected, whether by party list or the single-constituency system, they are faced with a political culture of embedded male privilege. The procedures and mores of these gendered institutions, far from welcoming women, produce a “cold climate”. The practices range from the merely annoying to those that inhibit women’s effectiveness and are by no means limited to more recent democracies.

Inadequate access to bathroom facilities is a constant complaint from elected women around the world. Even in the U.S., male senators have access to a private bathroom just off the Senate floor, while women senators have to walk down two floors to a public restroom. Further, male leadership enforced a dress code for women who, until recently, had to wear lipstick and skirts on the Senate floor to conform to an outmoded convention of southern gentility; women staffers were delighted when Hillary Clinton wore a pantsuit to her swearing-in ceremony.

Meeting times for legislatures and committees conflict with the "double duty" expected from women but seldom from men. Many parliaments follow the British tradition of meeting in late afternoon until late in the evening. Pressure from women members in South Africa changed the meeting times and introduced child care services during sessions. The French Communist Party now provides domestic support for female candidates during campaigns so that lower-income women are able to compete.[4]

The organization of legislative business often relegates women to committees on "soft" subjects such as education, health or welfare, areas which account for the largest public expenditure in most countries, but which lack the status of assignments in finance, defence or foreign affairs. Learning how to negotiate procedures takes years. To counter their junior status, women have set up cross-party caucuses to support legislation for women. Utilizing information from women's organizations or women in the bureaucracy, such tactics strengthen women's position in the legislature and begin to subtly undermine male confrontational politics with a more inclusive style.

Comparing women legislators in Sweden and India

The United Nations consistently places Sweden, along with Norway and Canada, at the top of its Human Development Index; India ranks 124th. Women in Sweden were granted suffrage in 1909; in 1950, the new Constitution of India gave equal voting rights to women and men for the first elections in 1952. Geographically, India is over seven times the size of Sweden; its population of 1,065 million dwarfs the 9 million total in Sweden. To accommodate its geographical and cultural diversity, India adopted a federal structure with many governmental

powers lodged in the states. In economic terms, Sweden is an advanced industrial country. Although India has pockets of rapid modernization, the country is predominantly rural with only 30% of the population living in urban areas.

India

The first UN world conference on women in Mexico City in 1975 had as its slogan "Equality, peace and development." International agencies poured economic development funds into post-independence India, promoting a paradigm that focused on formal, paid work, while ignoring subsistence activities (increasingly carried out by women only) or care work. This rendered most women's work invisible. In response, women founded both research centres and activist groups to address the often detrimental impact of development programs on poor rural women and initiated programs to help women economically. But tenacious caste and patriarchal traditions continued to undermine efforts on behalf of women. Women's groups decided to seek reserved seats for women in all elective bodies to legislate change. While efforts to achieve reserved seats at the state and national levels have stalled, two constitutional amendments passed in 1992 require that one third of all seats in both rural and urban councils must be filled by women. The 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India also strengthened the move toward decentralization by granting constitutional status to these local bodies, creating a tiered system for elected assemblies, and expanding their functions and resource base. As well, this amendment granted more powers over governmental services and projects to the three tiers of rural councils or "panchayats", at the village, block and district levels.[5]

Because the Indian electoral system is based on single-member constituencies, reserved seats for women are based on a geographical area, which rotates after each five-year term. Men cannot run in these areas, but since candidates are not required to live in the district they represent, a male panchayat member displaced when his area is reserved for women could stand in a neighbouring constituency. Chairs of these bodies must reflect the reservations and must rotate.

More than a million women have served as panchayat members. Hundreds of organizations, universities and agencies participated in training sessions that explained the intricacies of council

and government procedures. Women panchayat members have succeeded in reducing corruption, building roads, repairing sewers and, in the case of new public housing projects, putting property ownership in women's names. Skeptics, who argue that many women are merely stand-ins for male family members, overlook the status and self-confidence acquired by women who become public officials. Voters seem more positive: the southern state of Karnataka has actually elected a panchayat with 46.7% women, an indication that women can also win general seats.

Municipal councils differ considerably from panchayats in both structure and powers. Council members have little control over the highly skilled bureaucrats who maintain the technical services required in metropolitan centres. The first detailed study of women in urban councils in India[6] shows that women members were selected for their party loyalty; none had advocated women's concerns, though some were members of their party's women's auxiliary or had worked with charitable organizations. Most are well educated – more than their male counterparts in large cities like Chennai and Delhi. In interviews, they reiterated that their role is to represent both men and women. Still, these councillors felt that women bore the brunt of urban problems such as poor water supply, inadequate sanitation and unemployment. Many felt that work on committees addressing these topics was a way of assisting women while retaining party support. Given this mindset, activists ignored municipal elections until recently, when women's human rights groups in Delhi began recruiting and training candidates and pressuring sitting members, especially about domestic violence.[7]

Efforts by a coalition of women's organizations to pass a national domestic violence bill were thwarted for 10 years. Finally in 2005, Indian women organized a national lobby, WomenPowerConnect (WPC), that maintains full-time lobbyists in New Delhi.[8] The legislative goals of WPC are set by state chapters; national conventions listed passage of a civil domestic violence bill, passage of the 33% reservation for women in Parliament, and work on gender-just budgeting. After 10 years of agitation, the Domestic Violence Bill was finally passed in November 2006.[9]

After years of focusing their energies on helping poor women through development projects or charitable activity, Indian women at all levels are beginning to use the political process to

address women's concerns through government programs and laws. These efforts, aided by the rapid, if spotty, modernization in the country, are challenging the caste/class/race hierarchies that have impeded drives for greater gender equity.

Sweden

Women in Sweden have benefited from the commitment of the Social Democratic Party to ensure economic independence to all. In addition to improving working conditions and pay, women's care work was recognized by granting child care, shorter working hours, and paid maternity – and paternity – leave. These policies drew on a left-wing strategy that had little input from independent feminist organizations. To some feminists, these rights meant that society saw women as a resource to be utilized, but not valued for their distinct perspectives. Rejecting the idea that their country is a form of paradise, they contested the gendered power that instructed women to play subordinate roles. Many women turned to culture to explore the ways such conditioning happens and to express their sense of invisibility and subordination through protests in art, poetry and stories.

Another approach was taken by the Women Can Foundation, formed to showcase women's accomplishments. They organized a fair in 1984: over 35,000 women and 200 journalists attended seminars and viewed exhibitions that showed what individual women can do. To stage the event, the group sought private funding instead of relying solely on government support. Through mobilizing for these, now semi-annual, fairs, women gain confidence and empowerment. The inclusion of diverse groups under the event's umbrella illustrates the complexity of women's lives. Women Can members work within society, but do not challenge it.

In contrast, the mobilization of women's groups against sexual assault by men confronted male power in the family. Women's shelters began as voluntary homes run by the group. The first shelter was set up in Stockholm in 1979 with a board of directors after heated controversy over the style of leadership. Subsequent centres around the country often utilized a more collective framework. By 1995, Sweden counted 133 shelters. Their dependence on public financing meant frequent collisions with municipal authorities who wanted women's shelters to change their

organizational structure. This represents a struggle by women to preserve their own space and concept of participation.

Despite their wide range of rights in Sweden, a growing chorus of women is demanding a change in the gendered power order, which reflects patriarchal dominance. Dissatisfied with the roles allotted to them by men, women now seek new ways of structuring society. A prime example of this trend is the establishment of a women's party, the Feminist Initiative, so that women's concerns are not diluted by male political party leaders. Sweden, however, is not the first country to have a women's party: Iceland's all-women party (Kvennalistinn) was represented in the legislature from 1983–99 and received up to 10% of the votes.[10]

The Feminist Initiative was formed in Sweden in 2005 by a group of politicians and intellectuals led by Ms. Gudrun Schyman, former leader of the Left Party. The party is premised on the view that despite many women's tireless efforts within Sweden's party politics, women's interests have never received adequate attention. The wage gap between men and women, violence against women, reform of the rape laws and individualized parental allowances are some of the priorities of the Feminist Initiative.[11] The party put up candidates in the 2006 parliamentary election and won around 0.68% of the votes and no seats. Despite these initial results, it is evident from this increased dissent that women in Sweden are becoming more active on the political scene than ever before.[12]

Equity or policy?

In both India and Sweden, women are expanding networks and organizations with the goal of influencing policies that maintain the current status quo. A water pipe may not appear to alter gender relations to a Swedish woman, but in the villages of India, using allocated funds to actually provide water instead of pocketing the money does challenge the traditional power structure. A crack in the limitations placed on women widens quickly as drops of change seep through. Feminists in both countries recognize that increasing the number of women in legislatures is necessary, but not sufficient, for enacting laws to alter women's lives. Without

consistent and strong outside pressure, the leaders of political parties will maintain male privilege.

The aspirations for a changed world differ widely between the two countries and within each one. Sweden exults in individualism; Indian scholars stress the importance of family. Women's views are not more monolithic than men's, but what women want is the right to be heard in critical debates about the future.

NOTES

[1] Information drawn from Julie Ballington and Azza Karam, eds., *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers,* rev. ed. (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2005), available on-line and also in paperback. The IDEA Web site at www.idea.int provides updated statistics, case studies and handbooks.

[2] Rwanda has the highest percentage of women elected to the national parliament – 48.8%. See Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Women in National Parliaments," www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm.

[3] See Irene Tinker, "Quotas for women in elected legislatures: Do they really empower women?" in *Women's Studies International Forum* Vol. 27, Nos. 5–6, November–December 2004, pp. 531–546; explores the uses of quotas around the world.

[4] Caroline Lambert, "French Women in Politics: The Long Road to Parity." *U.S.–France Analysis* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, May 2001), pp. 5–8.

[5] These amendments also have provisions for representation of listed castes and tribes in local assemblies; the one-third reservation for women also applies to these reserved seats.

[6] Archana Ghosh and Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal, *Democratization in progress: women and local politics in urban India* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2005).

[7] Violence against women is a huge problem throughout India. Dowry deaths – in which lower-middle class families who feel the bride's family is not providing sufficient material goods over and above the legal limits on dowry pour cooking oil over the bride and claim she died in a cooking accident – are just the most visible manifestation of women's low status.

[8] Leaders of the European Women's Lobby (EWL), the organization on which WPC is modelled, came to India to assist in its formation; the EWL president, Kirsti Kolthoff, is from Sweden.

[9] See www.womenpowerconnect.org.

[10] See International IDEA and Stockholm University, "Global Database of Quotas for Women," www.quotaproject.org.

[11] See the Web site of the Feminist Initiative at www.feministisktinitiativ.se.

[12] Gunnel Gustafsson, ed., Maud Eduards and Malin Rönnblom, *Towards a New Democratic Order?: Women's Organizing in Sweden in the 1990s* (Stockholm: Publica, 1997). The three authors wrote this book as part of a series called Democracy in Transition. This self-described feminist project is a major source for this article. Also utilized was Brit Fougner and Mona Larsen-Asp, eds., *The Nordic countries, a paradise for women?* (Stockholm: Nordic Council, 1994).