Women's Participation in Decision-Making and Leadership A Global Perspective [1]

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For those of us who were privileged to attend both the NGO Forum in Huairou and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing proper, an outstanding feature of the experience was the very marked contrast in decision-making and leadership at the two events. The NGO Forum really was a women's forum, run by women, focussed on women's issues and concerns and attended by a predominantly female audience. Although the comparatively small number of men who attended the Forum often participated quite actively and enthusiastically in individual events, overall they played a very peripheral and marginal role. Had they not been there, little would have changed.

By contrast, at the UN Conference in Beijing the picture was substantially reversed. Although it was an event on which women and women's issues ostensibly comprised the entire agenda, the players, the environment and the sub-text were quite different. Although many of the delegations to the Conference included significant numbers of women and many of the NGO women from Huairou also attended, dark suits predominated. More than half of the official government speakers were men and one soon realized that their decisions would carry the day rather than those of the women.

I was surprised to see that the women with whom we had worked in Huairou who also attended the Conference suddenly looked different. They dressed differently, more sombrely and more formally. They also behaved differently. Where colourful, laughing and informal cross-national groups had sprung up out of new friendships and common interests in Huairou, in Beijing national groups representing more specific country interests dominated. Delegates clustered around their (often male) leaders with serious expressions, lobbying, negotiating and dealing for the outcome they (that is, their country, the male leaders) desired. The emphasis on substantive issues at Huairou was replaced by a concentration on more symbolic and superficial concerns - how will the action be perceived by others rather than does it address the problem. Although the Beijing Platform for Action included very specific provisions advocating the equal participation of women in decision-making

and leadership at all levels, it was far from practising what it preached.

As I observed this rather startling contrast, it occurred to me that the usual sex roles in decision- making and leadership had been reversed in Huairou, while the Beijing Conference represented the status quo. The experience of marginality that some men undoubtedly felt in Huairou was one that women have learned to accept as "normal": the consequence of living and working in an environment that was created by, and continues to be dominated by, people with different needs, interests and priorities from your own. The experience of "men as men" (rather than as individuals) in Huairou would tell us a great deal about why, despite the provisions of the Platform for Action, women are still so far from achieving equality in decision-making and leadership.

Current Levels of Women's Participation in Decision-Making and Leadership:

Tables 1 and 2 show just how far women are from achieving equal participation in decision- making and leadership. From most perspectives, the picture is rather gloomy: women's share of decision-making and leadership is small and, in most parts of the world, shows no clear trend toward improvement. Only in the Nordic countries are women approaching equality in the political sphere, and even in those countries the picture in the private sector and such key institutions as universities is often much less satisfactory. For example, almost no women are managing directors in the 100 largest private enterprises in the Nordic countries. [Last week's British election gives cause for greater optimism: reports indicate that 125 women were elected in the Labor Party's 419 seat landslide win.]

By 1995, only 24 women had ever been elected as heads of State of Government in modern times. In this case the trend appears more encouraging: half had been elected to office since 1990. Between 1987 and 1995, the number of countries where women held no ministerial posts fell from 93 to 59. However, less than 6 per cent of cabinet ministers were women in 1994 and women held more than 15 per cent of ministerial positions in only 16 countries.

Changes in women's participation in government show no clear trend. For example, most countries where women hold top ministerial positions do not have comparable representation at the sub-ministerial, suggesting that women senior ministers are not pioneering a new trend. Women's membership in parliaments has declined in eastern and western Asia and fell sharply in eastern Europe after 1987, although women seem to have increased their share of seats in recent elections. However, measures such as the 33.3 per cent reservation for women introduced by the Government of India at the local level and now being considered for other levels of decision-making can be expected to create a pool of experienced potential women leaders. These women may begin to move into political decision making in increasing numbers of future.

Table 2 suggests that women are excluded from decision-making by more than just lack of education. Women's position in the labour force as a

significant source of highly skilled and qualified labour as professional and technical workers is not matched by an equivalent contribution as administrative and managerial workers. In the world as a whole, women provide almost 40 per cent of professional and technical workers but less than 15 per cent of administrators and managers. Even in the industrial countries, the proportions are quite unbalanced: almost half of the professional and technical workers but just over one quarter of the administrators and managers. As the experience of the United Nations suggests (Table 1), the imbalance becomes more pronounced in the higher levels of decision-making. The UN experience also shows how fragile improvement may be: in 1949 there were more women in the UN, although heavily concentrated at the lowest levels, than a quarter of a century later in 1975.

Why should women share decision-making & leadership?

The Beijing Platform for Action includes a strong statement calling for governments to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making. It also called for government to increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership. Why is it necessary or desirable for women to share in decision-making and leadership? Two kinds of argument may be advanced, a human rights argument and a more pragmatic, efficiency-based argument, although there is considerable overlap between the two.

In democratic countries, rights-based arguments are difficult to deny (although the Beijing Platform merely noted that women's participation in decision making is needed in order to "strengthen democracy and promote its regular functioning"). It is a basic principle of democracy that adult citizens from all walks of life should have equal access to participation in decision-making and leadership. Ideally, representatives of groups with specific interests and perspectives should participate directly in decision-making processes and leadership to ensure that both the agenda of issues to be considered and the decisions subsequently made incorporate their views. It is untenable that any specific interest group, say a particular ethnic or religious group, could be systematically excluded from direct participation in decision-making on the grounds that others can "speak" for them. Since women and men play different roles in society and therefore have different needs, interests and priorities, it follows that women also cannot be adequately represented in decision-making by men.

The pragmatic, efficiency-based argument for women's participation in decision making and leadership also starts from recognition that women and men have different needs, interests and priorities arising from their specific roles and situations. Even when men are aware of and seek to represent this difference, they lack information in the same way that mainstream decision makers are unable to capture the perspectives and needs of minority cultures or the poor. This failure to incorporate women's concerns in decision making represents a major loss for society as a whole. Women's needs, interests and concerns are not just those of women themselves, but reflect their primary roles as mothers, wives and caregivers. Therefore, incorporating a woman's perspective in decision making should result in better decisions that more

adequately reflect the needs and interests of children and families (including the male members).

Finally, the Beijing Platform recognizes that women's equal participation in decision making and political life is vital for the advancement of women. Women remain in a position of inequality compared with men partly because their situation, needs and concerns are not even considered in current decision making: they do not even reach the mainstream agenda. Much of the discussion at the NGO Forum focussed on women's need to become involved in "setting the agenda". The advancement of women demands that women participate actively in setting the agenda and determining issues on which decisions are to be made. An Australian woman politician recently pointed out that it was only when women entered the Australian parliament in significant numbers that issues such as child care, violence against women and the valuation of unpaid labour were even considered by policy makers. As a result of these issues entering the agenda, Australia now promotes family-friendly employment policies, including work-based child care. It also recently undertook a nationally representative survey of violence against women, collects time allocation data and is now using that data to try to incorporate the value of unpaid work in national policy making.

Why are women marginalized in leadership?

Women are marginalized in decision making and leadership by a variety of processes that begin in infancy. In most societies, women lack experience of decision making and leadership in the public arena because girls, in contrast to boys, are socialized to play passive roles and given little opportunity to make decisions or develop leadership skills outside the family context. In most traditional societies girls are kept largely within the confines of the household and family where they are protected and taught to accept the decisions that others parents, teachers, brothers make on their behalf. As a result of this lack of experience in a public context, girls tend to the lack self-confidence and skills needed to function effectively in positions of formal leadership. An added handicap for many is their lack of capacity due to discrimination in access to education and training: in most countries, women have higher levels of illiteracy and fewer years of schooling than men.

Even women when women succeed in gaining education and enter the decision-making mainstream, they are often marginalized by an institutional setting that reflects men's needs and situation and ignores women's different needs and experience. Modern work patterns and practices are designed for men who have a supportive wife to take care of their essential domestic needs and family responsibilities at home hence the saying that every career woman needs a good wife! Because it is designed to fit the needs and expectations of men, the modern work environment is not family friendly. The hours and inflexibility of the working day, overtime, the location of work and commuting times make it difficult for working women to meet the dual expectations of their family and work roles, giving rise to role conflict.

Most men do not face such role conflict because society regards their family and personal roles as discretionary, meaning that they are subsidiary to and have to be fitted in with the primary work role. Thus, although men play

important roles as husbands and fathers, these generally do not interfere with their primary work role as family breadwinner. For example, if a man's wife or child falls ill or is otherwise in need of his assistance, he is not expected (nor, in most cases, permitted) to leave his work in order to attend to them. Nor will he be considered a "bad" father or husband as a consequence. By contrast, women's primary roles as wife and mother require their attention 24 hours a day and thus, for working women, must be carried out simultaneously with the work role. Even where a working woman has domestic assistance, she is still held responsible for managing her family. If her child or husband is ill, she is expected (and grudgingly permitted) to interrupt her work in order to ensure that their needs are met. If she fails to do so, society tends to judge her as a "bad" wife or mother.

In addition to role conflict, women often find themselves isolated and marginalized in unfriendly, if not hostile, male-dominated institutional cultures. A colleague recently described the situation of women in her office in the following terms: women must continually prove themselves to be capable, but the men are assumed to be competent even when they are demonstrably not. Women must provide strong arguments to support their views; men are simply believed on the basis of their professional qualifications and personal relationships.

In the work place, women are often judged by two quite different and conflicting standards, as women and as workers, placing them in a classic no-win situation. For example, good employees at the management level are usually expected to be decisive, articulate, assertive and clear about their goals and objectives. However, in most cultures women *as women* are expected to be submissive, passive and demure. Thus a woman who displays the characteristics of a good manager may find that her supervisors are not appreciative because they are actually and probably unconsciously judging her as a woman, as well as a worker. Some women also find that there is no "space" for them to perform effectively as decision makers because men dominate debate, male networks determine promotions and sexist stereotypes (for example, assumptions such as "women cannot work in the field", "will not take transfers away from their families", made without actually consulting the women concerned) bar them from gaining the experience required for senior decision-making positions.

What can be done?

This analysis of the reasons for women's exclusion from decision making and leadership suggests a number of strategies to work toward equal access for women to decision making and leadership. The Beijing Platform for Action also identifies several specific issues that need to be addressed, including socialization and negative stereotyping, which have kept decision making the domain of men. The Platform calls on actors to: create a gender balance in government and administration; integrate women into political parties; recognize that shared work and parental responsibilities promote women's increased participation in public life; promote gender balance within the UN system; work toward equality between women and men in the private sector; establish equal access for women to training; increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership; and increase women's

participation in the electoral process and political activities.

At the personal level, perhaps the first thing that needs to done is to change the way we rear our children. We must provide our daughters with opportunities to develop their decision making skills and leadership capacities, and we must train our sons to respect their sisters as equals. In particular, we must ensure that daughters have equal access to the same quantity, quality and type of education as sons. Since this is a long-term objective, we must also take immediate steps to place more women in decision-making and leadership positions and, **_at the same time_**, provide them with the necessary catch-up training and experience in order to be effective.

However, as the experience of capable women decision makers has demonstrated, these measures alone will not be sufficient. We also need to address the institutional context of decision making and leadership to create more women- and family-friendly institutions and organizational cultures. Some industrial countries have already begun slowly to move in this direction, reducing working hours, introducing flexi time and career structures for part-time workers (most of whom are women) and providing government-subsidized or work-based child care, maternity and parental leave and emergency leave for caregivers. In addition, institutions need to reexamine their organizational culture and work practices. An interesting example of this may be found in a study of organizational culture in the Bangladesh NGO BRAC in the most recent issue of the Oxfam Journal **_Gender and Development_** (Volume 5 No. 1 February 1997). We also need to ensure that there are women in senior positions able to act as role models and mentors for young women and to establish women's networks that can support women in the same way that conventional male- dominated networks support the career development and promotions of men.

An essential step toward the more equal participation of women in decision making and leadership is awareness-raising for men. Institutional cultures that are unfriendly to women are not usually the result of deliberate policies but the consequences of their development over time to meet the needs and situations of men, who have for so long dominated the public domain and who have different needs, priorities and concerns from women. Men need to become aware of the ways in which their assumptions, attitudes and behaviour are gendered to reflect their own situation, exclude a woman's perspective and thus obstruct women's equal participation. Women and men together must then negotiate a new institutional setting that provides space for both groups.

What is being done?

As noted, a number of countries have introduced measures designed to promote women's equal access to decision making and leadership. Some of these, particularly in the industrial countries, are ongoing activities that are part of a long-standing drive toward equality. Others are more recent and seem to be specifically related to commitments made at the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women or to the equally important awareness-raising processes that preceded it. An exciting example of these is the introduction of

a 33.3 per cent quota for women in the local *panchayat raj* elections in India. This has resulted in a sharp increase in the number of women decision makers at the local level and provided an important training ground for women to move on to higher levels of decision making and leadership. The Government of India is now considering introducing a similar quota at higher levels of government.

Over the last two decades, most interventions have been directed toward strengthening women's leadership through women's organizations and national machineries. While this is clearly essential, perhaps the time has come to pay more attention to complementing these measures with programmes to strengthen the capacities of individual women. In the private and public sectors, mentoring and other leadership programmes for women are being introduced in a number of countries. Although most of these activities have been in the industrial countries, some developing countries, particularly the Philippines, are now exploring the potential for such programmes.

One area of decision making in which developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region have been particularly active is politics and the electoral process. As part of the preparatory activities for the Beijing Conference, most regions of the world held national and regional meetings seeking a more active role for women in political decision making at all levels. These culminated in Regional Conferences and the First Global Congress on Women in Politics held at the NGO Forum in Huairou. Women around the world are now preparing for the Second Global Congress on Women in Politics to be held in New Delhi in February 1998. The Secretariat for this conference is the Center for Asia-Pacific Women in Politics (CAPWIP), a regional network of national and sub-regional bodies. CAPWIP is currently setting up a regional training programme to support women who are already in or who are considering entering politics at any level. A number of countries also held training programmes to prepare women for participation in specific elections. For example, in Thailand a number of training programmes were set up to assist women participate in local elections in 1996. In the Pacific, a sub-regional training course was held in conjunction with the regional WIPPAC Congress in November 1996 and others are planned to prepare women for forthcoming elections in several Pacific countries in the next two years.

Can a man be Prime Minister?

In conclusion, I would like to share with you an enlightening story told by Mrs Gro Hart Bruntland at the Beijing Conference. It illustrates both the power of the stereotypes that currently obstruct women's participation in decision making and the ways in which they can, and must be, broken. Mrs Hart Bruntland recalled how, when she first became Prime Minister, many Norwegians were shocked at the idea that a woman could hold the key decision-making and leadership post and predicted disaster and a short tenure in office for her. Many years later, after successfully holding her post for more than a decade, she was told of a conversation overhead in a primary school playground. A small boy had boasted to his friends that he was going to be Prime Minister when he grew up. His playmates girls laughed and told him: "Don't be silly! A man can't be Prime Minister it has to be a woman."

Table 1: Women's Participation in National and International Leadership, 1995

Heads of State or Government	By 1995, only 24 women had been elected as heads of State or Government, half since 1990
Government and Cabinet	1994 women were 5.7 per cent of cabinet ministers (3.3 per cent in 1987) 1994 women held no ministerial position in 59 countries (93 countries in 1987) 1994 women held more than 15 per cent of ministerial positions in only 16 countries (8 countries in 1987) Sweden 1994 - 52 per cent of ministers were women
Sub-ministerial level	1994 women held more than 15 per cent of positions in 23 countries (only 14 countries in 1987)
Parliamentary representation	Wide variation 1987-1994 proportion of women declined in eastern and western Asia Strongest in northern Europe (Nordic countries)
Overall	Women's representation at highest levels of government weakest in Asia In southern Asia, women hold 5-6 per cent of senior positions, but in other regions of Asia women hold not more than 2 per cent Women most represented in social, law and justice ministries 1991 formation of International Association of Women Judges
United Nations	First woman Assistant Secretary General 1972 1993/94 12 women at this level 1985 General Assembly first set goals for women staff 30 per cent women in the Secretariat achieved 1990 By end of 1993, only 13 per cent of women in senior management No women ever elected to the International Court of Justice (89 male judges elected since 1945) No woman ever appointed executive head of a UN autonomous or specialized agency
Private sector	1993, women comprise only 1 per cent of CEOs and 2 per cent of senior managers in the largest US corporations. Outside the US, there was no woman at the top level, 1 per cent in the second level and only 2 per cent at the third.

Source : United Nations, 1995. **The World's Women 1995. Trends and Statistics.** United Nations: New York

Table 2: Women's Participation in Decision-Making
1990 and 1995

Country	HDI Rank	Women in Government 1995			Administrators & Managers 1990 [Per cent female]	Professional & Technical 1990 [Per cent female]
		Ministerial	Sub-ministerial	Total		
Japan	3	6.7	8.8	8.3	9	42
Australia	11	13.3	26.7	23.7	43	25
New Zealand	14	7.4	20	16.8	32	48
Thailand	52	3.8	4.5	4.4	22	52
Korea, Rep of	29	3.4	1.2	1.5	4	45
Singapore	34	0	7.1	5.1	34	16
Fiji	47	8.7	10.7	9.8	10	45
Malaysia	53	7.7	4.7	5.8	12	45
Iran, Islamic Rep of	66	0	0.5	0.4	4	33
Philippines	95	8.3	26.3	23.9	34	63
Lao PDR	138	0	4.1	2.7	. .	. .
Vietnam	121	6.5	2.4	3.9	. .	. .
Myanmar	133	0	0	0	. .	. .
Pakistan	134	3.7	1	1.6	3	20
India	135	4.2	6.3	6.1	2	21
Bangladesh	143	4.5	3	3.4	5	23
Nepal	151	0	0	0	. .	. .
Papua New Guinea	126	0	3.1	1.6	12	30
Indonesia	102	3.6	1.4	1.8	7	41

China	108	11.1	21.1	16.2	13	48
Samoa (Western)	88	6.7	7.4	7.1	12	47
Mongolia	113	0	8.7	4.7	. .	. .
Korea, DP Rep of	83	1.2	0.6	0.6	. .	. .
Sri Lanka	89	12.5	7.9	8.7	17	25
Cambodia	156	0	6.6	5.1	. .	. .
Developing	. .	7.7	8.5	7.6	10	36
Industrial Countries	. .	12.6	11.3	10.8	27	48

Source : UNDP, 1996. **UNDP Human Development Report 1996.**