Chapter 4: Women's Political Participation

In traditional nomadic society, women were excluded from the formal political system and their sphere of influence in decision-making was circumscribed within the household. The contemporary perception of the position of women in decision-making in traditional Mongolian society is very much influenced by popular narratives of the lives of queens as influential consorts of important rulers.

The 1921 revolution brought sweeping changes in women's political status, ending their formal subordination to men and granting them citizenship rights. Mongolia was organized as a one-party state, with strong political and economic links to and under the patronage of the Soviet Union. The principles of authority and hierarchy within the formal structures of power, decision-making and administration prevailed. Membership in the party was a necessary route to becoming a candidate and to being elected to national or local political office. The party and state administrative machinery was centrally organized, with a system of top-down control from the capital city to the *aimags* and *soums*. The latter functioned as local extensions of state power and were primarily responsible for providing public services.

The Constitution guaranteed equal rights to all citizens irrespective of origin, religious belief and sex and the state introduced egalitarian measures in line with the socialist principles of universal equality. In 1926 the legal framework guaranteeing free participation of women in politics and in the labour market was established. In addition, Mongolia became party to important international human rights treaties including:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,
- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,
- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women,
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In 1924, Mongolian women were given an equal right to vote and to be elected. In 1924, the Mongolian Women's Federation was founded as part of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party. Funded by the state, it provided the mechanism for women's participation in the formal political system. Since men and women had not been considered equal in the political sphere before 1921, party policy was that women's participation had to be positively encouraged. A quota system was established to ensure 25 per cent parliamentary representation by women. As a result, women were elected to local government (30% in 1931), and to the Baga Khural, the country's highest legislative body at the time. Women were appointed ministers of state and heads of government departments.

Despite party sponsorship, women's representation was limited and power in decision-making was not really shared between men and women. The political structure remained male-dominated. The revolution had not been a process of profound social transformation and did not challenge either the underlying norms and structures of gender inequality or the tensions and conflicts in gender relations in Mongolian society. Women were considered as a group that needed special protection and consideration but not as an important driving force for political development and

progress. Explicit rules and mechanisms governed the terms of access of women to the public sphere. They defined prohibited occupations for women, in what are in fact strategic sectors of the economy and included specific measures to promote women's employment but at the same time make this conditional on their reproductive obligations. A quota of 25 per cent, rather than 50 per cent, which would have been consistent with the ethos of equal rights, is an expression of party policy toward women, despite their emphasis on universal literacy and education and their encouragement of women to take up professional posts.

When the democratic reform process started in 1990, Mongolian women were a highly educated mass, but burdened with double or triple duties and were unassertive "passive" subjects with regard to state policy-making. The democratization process and the 1992 Constitution reaffirmed the equal rights of male and female citizens to civil and political activities. This process took place in a context of economic collapse and of the weakening of the political and administrative links with the dissolved Soviet Union. However, the bureaucracy, the rules, mechanisms and structures remain an important force as far as decision-making and policy implementation is concerned. The party has undergone a process of internal reform and the institu-

tions of both state and party have been particularly involved in shaping the transition. The nature of the involvement of party women in the shift from a one-party state to a multiparty democracy is not, however, well documented. Nor is women's influence over the process of transition, especially in relation to how and what political structures and organs were created and negotiated among the established centres of political and administrative power.

The process of reform was undertaken by existing state and party actors but in a context shaped by new actors and meso-level institutions outside the formal political system. The democratization process has involved both the transformation of old structures and the emergence of new institutions and organizations. It has been accompanied by vigorous political debate, free expression and participation as well as an active private press. Over 20 different political parties have been created, which contest elections and shape the policy agenda. NGOs previously associated with and controlled by the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party grew more autonomous, and in 1997, all NGOs became formally autonomous from both government and political parties.

Women have played an active part in the democratization process and have been particularly dynamic in the growth of civil society and the voluntary sector as well as in the media. Women's NGOs have been active in framing and scrutinizing the laws guaranteeing civil, political rights and prohibiting discrimination against women, using CEDAW widely as the framework in drafting new laws and amending existing ones.

In the course of these changes, the quota system for women's representation was abandoned. The emphasis was put on enacting laws that specify the institutional framework and govern the functions of parliament. A constitutional court has been established to safeguard the constitution, which enshrines the principle of separation of powers of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. The Great Hural is the highest organ of the state and the supreme legislative power. Parliament approves the state budget and

Table 4.1: Women in political decision-making, 1997

|	Total	Women
President of Mongolia	1	0
Speaker of Parliament	1	0
Deputy Speaker	1	0
Prime Minister	1	0
Members of Parliament	76	8
Cabinet Members	9	1
State Secretaries	9	0
Head of the Presidential Office	1	0
National Security Council	1	0
Governors (*aimag, soum,* city, district)	373	9
Ambassadors	28	0
Chairpersons of Local *Hurals*	22	0

Source: WIRC 1997b

determines the legal basis for local self-governing authorities. While the powers of Parliament are qualified by those of the President, the Cabinet and the Constitutional Court, its representative functions and thus responsiveness and accountability to the electorate are not clearly specified. There are few mechanisms to ensure close channels of communication between the electorate and their parliamentary representatives. Moreover, there are few institutional mechanisms to strengthen the oversight functions of government, to ensure participation and accountability within the new governance structures.

The political reform also concerns the local levels of government. To preserve the link between central and local levels of administration, the Prime Minister continues to appoint *aimag* governors, who in turn appoint *soum* governors. But in addition, local *hurals* of citizens' representatives are now elected under the multiparty system. These bodies nominate gubernatorial candidates for approval by the Prime Minister, who can however override the local *hurals'* choice. In terms of fiscal decision-making, local revenues are raised from economic entities and organizations operating at local levels, from individual herder households to major industrial corporations, but the central government has the right to determine whether and which entities' taxes accrue to the central rather than the local budget. On the other hand, when *aimags* have revenue shortfalls, central governments allocate subsidies, tied to specific purposes, thus limiting the extent to which local bodies can control local budgetary allocations.[1]

## Women's political and decision-making representation

Women's political empowerment has many dimensions. The political arena encompasses the electoral process and machinery, recruitment into the legislature as well as the exercise of decision-making power within the legislative, and the executive themselves. The

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[1] Only four out of the 21 *aimags* are self-financing currently.

Figure 4.1: Women's share of seats in Parliament
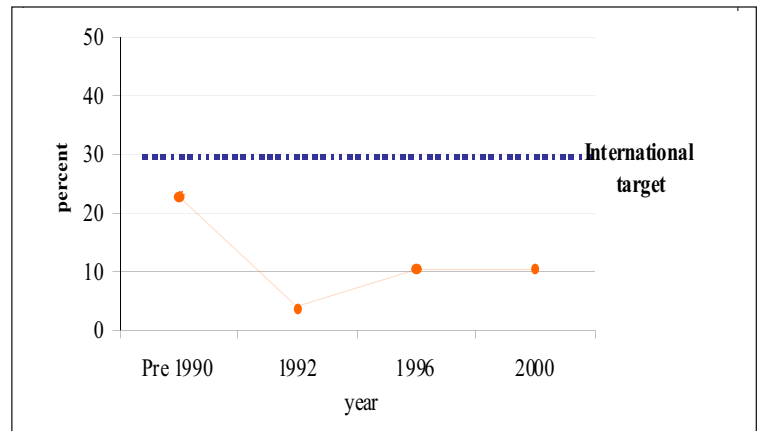
Source: Compiled from GCSD 2000b

**Figure 4.2: Women candidates for Parliament**
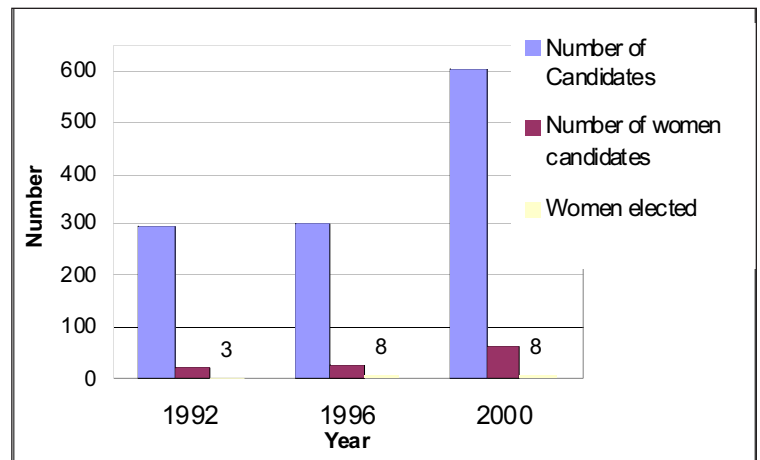
Source: Compiled from GCSD 2000b

international target for women's representation in the legislature is 30 per cent.

Women's share of parliamentary seats fell sharply after the transition, from 23 per cent to 3.9 per cent in the 1992 election, and rose to 10.5 per cent in the election of 1996, maintaining the same share in 2000. While this dimension of gender equality shows a clear regress, an examination of some related data shows a more complex picture. First, the number of women candidates has nearly tripled since 1992 (Figure 4.2), although their election chances have worsened. While 13 per cent of women candidates were elected in 1992, and 28 per cent in 1996, only 12 per cent were elected in 2000.

Figure 4.3: Women executive officers in central governing bodies, 1997
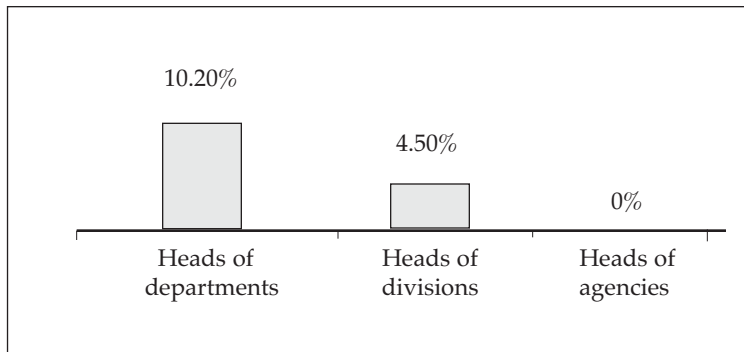
Source: Compiled from GCSD 2000b

A snapshot of women in political decision-making in 1997, reveals that the low representation of women is even worse across decision-making organs and structures in the executive (Table 4.1).

In the higher levels of administration, women have an equally low profile, although the process for achieving these positions is different. With the number of women currently at middle levels of management, the trend is for a gradual increase in women's share over time, unless there are strong gender biases and /or discrimination in promotion in public administration and the state sector (Figure 4.3).

In the judiciary, 70 per cent of all provincial judges and 50 per cent of all city judges are women, even when women have a lower retirement age than men. Higher level positions in the Supreme Court are, however, dominated by men.

What is to be done?

The transition decade has been and continues to be a learning experience for women engaged in the political sphere, engaging the women's movement in a continuing debate. Many facets of women's disempowerment in politics have been explored, along with the reasons that explain this complex situation and strategies to address it. Three main strands have been identified: the political dynamics since the transition, the deep-seated barriers to women's participation embedded in socio-cultural and economic factors and issues of women's agency and self-empowerment.

The relative importance of these factors has been a continuous subject for debate and for determining strategies for women's empowerment in the political sphere. Such debates are conducted mostly by NGOs and by parliamentary women's caucuses that have been created across party lines. In fact, the intersections between NGOs and political parties and between individual candidates and NGOs and the media are numerous.

One of the earliest NGOs, the Liberal Women's Brain Pool (LEOS), created in 1992, has focused on promoting women's political rights and participation in parliament and decision-making. They conducted a survey among over 70 middle and top level managers in nine ministries, to discover the reasons for women's marginal occupancy of decision-making positions. Among managers:

- 34.1 per cent said women were marginalized because of their sex;

- 24.3 per cent said women were marginalized because of their reproductive duties;

- 19.5 per cent said women were marginalized because of their household burden and limited time for self-development;

- 12.2 per cent said women were marginalized because they had lower skills.

The answers show that deep-seated social constructions of gender identity and of women's place in society are considered to be very important. Apart from the barriers to do with women's obligations and how women and perceived and treated, there is a sense that the reluctance women have to enter politics are to do with their own self-worth and definition of what they can and cannot do.

Strategies for change

The small share of women candidates and women elected in 1992 has focused attention on the reasons for this phenomenon as well as what to do to change it. Strategies centred on assessing the role of the multi-

party system and introducing quotas for parliamentary representation. There was a greater focus on how the multiparty system is being shaped and how party machineries in a market-driven economy function to capture power, define party programmes and set the policy agenda, as well as how the parties are organized, recruit members and select candidates.

A roundtable meeting of women NGOs entitled "The Election System and Women's Participation" was held in November 1995, at which it was suggested that election social psychology was driven primarily by economic and political elites rather than by the general public or ordinary electors. The nomination and election of women has more to do with the mechanisms of the political system rather than the construction of gender stereotypes or electors' psychology. Men and women, and women particularly, are not seriously concerned about the electoral system and of the impact it will have on their daily lives. There is a tendency for women candidates and women's organizations to limit their activities within some fractions of political parties, and not analyse deeply how these systems or fractions target different social groups.

With regard to the quota, the first coalition of women NGOs before the 1996 election proposed reintroducing the quota as the best way to increase women's representation in political decision-making. The proposal focused on instituting a quota system for political parties since the party top decision-makers are usually the ones who decide the selection and nomination processes for potential candidates. At the same time, the National Programme for the Advancement of Women (which was adopted after the first National Forum of Women NGOs, "Women in Social Development," in 1996) set a target of at least 20 per cent in the representation of women in central and local state and government top decision-making positions, both elected and appointed, by the year 2000.

The coalition of women NGOs established before the 2000 election issued an appeal to the political parties and voters to encourage more women in the selection and nomination process. While between 1996 and 1990, the number of women who presented themselves as candidates more than doubled, they came from a small base and were not enough to make an impact, not least because the number of women elected remained the same. Neither the quota, which is still controversial within the women's movement, nor the target, which has been accepted by all, has been achieved.

The aftermath of the 2000 election has sharpened views that the focus should be on getting more women candidates selected by party machineries. The analysis is that the latest election experiences show that the citizens vote more for the party rather than for candidates. Who is elected is not so much a matter of the candidate's education, experience or political will. Judging by this, it seems that the best strategy is to work with political parties in order to promote more women in political decision-making positions. For example, if the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) had nominated a maximum number of women for the 2000 parliamentary election, the public would have supported a maximum number of women to seats in Parliament. This would enable women's caucuses or fractions attached to the political parties to play an important role in increasing women representation in political life.

The gendered nature of party politics

An examination of what is needed to achieve the target for women's representation through substantially increasing the number of women candidates, is illuminating for an understanding of women's situation. How is increasing women's selection as candidates within all parties likely to win elections and within constituencies which are safe seats for these parties, rather than marginal ones?

The first issue concerns the reason so few women are selected in the first place, presumably because they are women and how women's issues and women's place in the public sphere is perceived. The analysis of the programs and platforms of political parties and individual candidates running for the 2000 election mainly focused on improving the social safety schemes for women and increasing various benefits for them.

These platforms and programmes lacked concrete methods and strategies to implement the promised activities. There was no understanding of the women's empowerment as an issue of rights, nor of the importance of women's voice or contributions in shaping the overall policy agenda. This definition and treatment of women's issues in party programmes begs the question of why this is the case and how to address it in order to increase women's presence in political parties and their leverage over party programmes.

Irrespective of the issue of women politicians' leverage for a gender-sensitive agenda, there still remains the question of how to increase the selection of women within the recruitment and selection process. Here the same patterns obtain as were analysed in the chapters concerning social and economic status. If the electorate does not vote according to candidates but parties, there is still the problem that the party machineries select the candidates. The gender biases in the processes and criteria for selection are pertinent.

The channels for recruitment into the party are youth organizations, and colleges and universities. While women are an overwhelming majority in higher education, the barriers or opportunities to their recruitment are less known. The most important avenue for preparing candidates with the knowledge and competencies for political activity is the Political Academy, which few women attend. Yet the degree of educational attainment in the profile of the candidate cannot be the sole criterion. How a candidate is selected depend on his or her sponsorship or patronage by political networks and/or his or her own resources. Women's exposure to these networks is much lower than men's, in ways that are very under-researched.

The state and party bureaucracy networks prior to the transition were not an enabling environment for women to translate their education and profession into political achievement. How these have evolved since the transition is pertinent to the issue of whether the environment of democratic pluralism will open spaces for women to become political actors. In the transition to democracy, women have lost out on their political entitlements, in much the same way that they lost out in the privatization process. What difference has a democratic environment of freedom of speech and participation made? To assess this it is important to consider that the political environment is increasingly shaped by a market-driven economy, where considerable financial resources are needed to run for office and where economic centres of power can play a key role in shaping decisions and in promoting and influencing political actors. Here the economic conditions facing women and the assessment of their political worth by those holding the levers of power and access to power become important. Women's vibrant and proactive involvement in some 40 women NGOs is celebrated and has strong roots in their educational attainment and commitment and engagement with public issues. But this dynamism and public spirit is in sharp contrast to their continuing low profile in formal instances of politics and decision-making, and in ways which are strongly connected with their economic and social situation.

Women's involvement in political decision-making is limited by the way gender relations and perceptions of gender identity permeate traditional political culture, in particular among the party machineries who act as gate-keepers for entry into politics. But even if these barriers could be eliminated through effective advocacy about women's considerable weight in Mongolian society and economy, which would affirm and legitimize their political status, there still remains the question of how to recruit women in sufficient numbers. This would require a concerted effort to remove the barriers to participation in political activity for women or to encourage women least disadvantaged by them, barriers which stem from lack of self-confidence and courage to stand as a candidate. Such barriers include, to begin with, unpaid work and other obligations in the domestic sector and inadequate financial and social resources to engage in market-driven politics.

Women's activism and policy mandates: The National Programme for the Advancement of Women (NPAW)

The National Programme for the Advancement of Women (NPAW) is not institutionalized within gov-

ernment, is not adequately resourced and is barely implemented. The inability to mobilize budgetary resources for the NPAW or to institutionalize it is another measure of the disempowerment of women in Mongolia. The concern over the lack of resources for implementing the NPAW is part of the wider question of who participates in fiscal decision-making and how decision-making is made.

Women's position at the institutional or meso level is uneven and contradictory, which affects their ability to influence decision-making in a way that yields concrete results. Many meso-level institutions intersect with formal decision-making instances in complex and subtle ways to set the agenda about which decisions will be taken as well as to influence their outcomes. NGOs that are active on the political front have not managed to participate significantly in moulding the structures and institutions that have been forged in the decision-making sphere, nor in shaping the direction of policy within these institutions. In fact, agency and responsibility for women's issues seems to have been transferred out of formal political and decision-making structures and into less formal institutions of civil society. The interplay and tension between these two spheres is manifest both in the drawing up of the National Programme for the Advancement of Women, and in the difficulties of its implementation.

The women's movement as well as gender advocates within the state machineries have been proactive in organizing around agendas for women's advancement. A driving force has been the success of Mongolian women in connecting with the global agendas that have been forged by women's movements worldwide under the aegis of the UN System. Although the endorsement of global agendas and commitments, as a top-down process, was characteristic of the socialist era, the process has been different since the transition. The decade of the transition has coincided with the UN Conferences of the 1990s, and has witnessed the engagement of both women's NGOs and advocates within government, with the support of UN agencies and bilateral organizations present in

Mongolia. As a result of their concerted efforts, the Government of Mongolia formally adopted the National Programme for the Advancement of Women in March 1996 by Government Resolution No.145. This resolution states that it is imperative to assess the status of women in the juncture of the transition process, define its policy and guidelines for action on the basis of national consensus and ensure the full implementation of the programme in line with the commitment to the advancement of women undertaken at the Fourth World Conference on Women.

The National Programme identified eleven critical areas of concern and provided strategic objectives and actions for 1996-2020 for each. The critical areas are:

A. Women and Economic Development

B. Women and Poverty

C. The Status of Rural Women

D. Women and Education

E. Women and Reproductive Health

F. Women and the Family

G. Women in Power and Decision-Making

H. Violence Against Women and Human Rights

I. National Machinery for Advancement of Women

J. Women and the Mass Media

K. Women and Environment

The objectives and benchmarks laid out in the National Programme cover the following periods corresponding to the stages of Mongolia's National Development Plan:

• 1996-2000: *During this period, national surveys and analysis of the status of women and gender equality will be undertaken. The information collected will provide the basis for developing a systematic policy to ensure equal rights of women and men and to improve the status of women within the context of the market economy. Policy will focus on reducing unemployment and relative*

poverty, eliminating extreme poverty, restoring levels of education and health achieved prior to transition and laying the foundations for further development.

- 2001-2010: *The objective during this period will be to ensure sustainable economic development to create a favourable environment for ensuring women's access to lifelong education, their full participation in political and economic life, including decision-making, the reduction of the burden of domestic work, recognition of the value of unremunerated labour, and the provision of social security.*

- 2010-2020: *During this period, conditions for economic self-reliance, sustainable growth and human development will be established, and the equal participation of women and men in political, economic, social and family shares will be achieved with women enabled to play a full and active role in the development process.*

The Programme also states that resources must be mobilized at national and local levels of government through the expansion of international cooperation, both multilateral and bilateral, and with the participation of the private sector.

In 1996, the National Council on Women's Issues was established as the agency responsible for monitoring the implementation of the NPAW. The Minister for Health and Social Welfare is the head of the National Council on Women's Issues. Experts of the Human Development Division of the Ministry's Strategic Management and Planning Department are in charge of women's affairs and there are focal points for women's issues in the 21 *aimags* and city district governors' offices at the local level. Women's issues have been reflected in the portfolio of the Standing Committee of the Great Hural.

The successful implementation of the National Programme requires strong commitment and political will on the part of the government and all of its agencies as well as active participation of community-based organizations, especially NGOs, economic entities and individuals. However, the National Symposium on the

Implementation of the National Programme for the Advancement of Women, held in June 1999, pointed out that due to the unworkable national machinery and financial constraints the objectives of the first phase of the National Programme have not completely materialized.

In the executive, the lack of progress in raising the profile of the NPAW and in institutionalizing its implementation remains a critical issue to address. The structure, function, location and composition of the NPAW continues to be pertinent to the need to make government accountable for commitments to women's economic, social and political rights. One of the major difficulties in institutionalizing the NPAW is the practice of making large-scale changes in the machinery of government each time a different party comes to power in elections. This tends to make structures and mechanisms rather short-lived and precarious, as is the case with the women's machinery.

The question of political will is crucial, however, and is directly related to the failure in institutionalizing the implementation of NPAW. If there was cross-party consensus in promoting the agenda of gender equality and women's advancement, particularly under a rights-based approach, institutionalizing it within the decision-making and administrative machinery would survive successive governments. This then raises the question of how parties assess the importance of the NPAW and of mainstreaming it in the legislative agenda, which has already been outlined. The analysis of the situation as regards governance issues in the legislature reveals that competing parties have yet to develop leadership over a legislative agenda even over mainstream issues. The difficulty of mobilizing support over the passage of draft bills such as the one on domestic violence is one such example. In addition, Parliament's oversight function over the conduct of government, its accountability and ability to implement the laws it passes is limited and not clearly articulated either in principle or in practice (UNDP 2000b).

Another question is the composition of the national women's machinery, particularly as regards the participation of NGOs. That issue always has to be

settled by an incumbent government. Where NGOs are identified with political parties or factions, then the debate the issues and the policy options tend to become polarized along party lines and can become enmeshed with the confrontational or adversarial politics of a multiparty system. On the other hand, NGO-wide caucuses and women's caucuses can cut across party lines to set a common agenda and develop consensus on strategies and implement a common plan of action. The pitfall here is that women's caucuses can be seen as threatening by an overwhelmingly male political establishment on the one hand and that women's issues continue to be set apart from the mainstream of the political agenda on the other.

Focusing on the target of getting women into Parliament has also to take into account the fact that the centres of power, agenda-setting and decision-making are not really located in the legislature but more in the executive. And this only up to the extent to which under globalization and an increasingly market-driven economy, real power continues to reside in the state political organs. This means that closer attention needs to be paid to how to combine state leverage in raising corporate responsibility towards gender equality with more direct focus on the corporations and private-sector institutions.

The weakness of the legislature as a power and decision-making point is compounded by another area of concern, namely, the weak link between the electorate and Parliament, at both central and local levels of decision-making. This weakness is manifested in the absence of effective representation and articulation of the interests of grass-roots voters and accountability towards the electorate. This situation renders the strategy of focusing on women's representation in Parliament one of widening access into a political elite.

Linked to the issue of representation of women in Parliament is the issue of how the agenda for gender equality is represented in the political arena and institutionalized in formal decision-making instances. What women can do once they are in Parliament will depend on the transformation of other decision-making structures and instances. Getting more women

selected as candidates has to be accompanied by a redefinition of how women's issues are presented in party programmes and manifestos and carried over into legislative mandates. It in turn means empowering women in the political arena to make governments accountable for this agenda, by putting in place the mechanisms and procedures to mainstream a gender approach on the basis of the National Programme for the Advancement of Women.

Conclusions

Women have made considerable progress in getting the government to adopt the NPAW. NGOs and women's caucuses have been actively involved in two elections, 1996 and 2000, mobilizing on the issue of a formal quota and on the need for greater selection of women candidates. It is through and around this creative engagement that an understanding of the complex and new dynamics of the multiparty system in a market economy and the wider gender dynamics and relations of power involved is being shaped and continually challenged.

The learning experience of two elections has sharpened the strategic focus on the party machinery and on targeting the selection of candidates. It provides a useful entry point to refine the understanding of the gender dynamics and relations of power involved in transforming the process to increase the selection of women candidates and promote the political empowerment of women.

The electoral experience also provides an entry point for conceptualizing and developing strategies for transforming the political arena and making it responsive and accountable to the NPAW. This requires taking into account the exclusion arising from regional and income inequalities as well as gender inequalities. It is an entry point that needs to integrate coherently the dimensions of citizens' rights and open up spaces for participation and for the accountability of politicians towards the electorate and of the executive towards Parliament. The efforts of women NGOs to enhance voter education and legal, human and civic rights, particularly at the local level, are initiatives that

can have greater leverage as part of this wider strategy. Promoting the election of women in local *hurals* has to be set in a context of the relationship between the local *hurals* and the central government. Ensuring that the election makes a difference to rural women's lives and livelihoods needs to involve the wider policy agenda of approaches to decentralization and its fiscal, legal and institutional implications.

Much groundwork remains to be done to understand the operation of gender dynamics in the political system and to formulate strategies to reach realistic and desired targets for gender equality and women's empowerment across all of the critical areas of concern in the NPAW.