

# Affirmative Action: A Kick-Start with Limitations

*Prospects and Problems for Women's Political Participation  
in Post-Conflict Societies*

An increasing number of countries emerging from armed conflict have introduced mechanisms for affirmative action to guarantee women's representation in post-conflict political processes. Burundi and Nepal are two of these countries, and both introduced quotas to bring about the entry of an unprecedented number of women into their political institutions following post-conflict elections. These positive achievements, however, should not deter us from addressing the many remaining challenges that impede women's participation in decision-making. Women have gained increased presence in political institutions, but entrenched patriarchal norms, gender inequality and discriminatory practices continue to hinder their ability to participate effectively in political decision-making. In order to reverse this trend, broader attitudinal and institutional changes, as well as a qualitative increase in women's capabilities, are in order. □▷

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## Women and Post-Conflict Decision-Making

Women's participation in post-conflict decision-making is important for various reasons. First, women are affected parties, victims, survivors and wagers of armed conflict, and thus have a major stake both in the resolution of conflict and in future political developments. Second, women typically constitute over 50% of a population, and their contribution in post-conflict decision-making is essential for efforts to foster a broad popular mandate for peace and democracy. Third, as a result of their different experiences, insights, approaches and points of view, women may broaden the political debate by redefining political priorities and providing new perspectives on political issues. Finally, future power relations are often cemented during the immediate post-conflict period, and women's participation in this process could lead to long-term advances for women's political empowerment.

Women's rights to participate in politics are enshrined in many international treaties and laws. Yet, the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security was the primary driver for international recognition of women's participation in peace and post-conflict decision-making processes. Unanimously adopted by the Security Council in October 2000, Resolution 1325 not only acknowledges the role of women in peace and security matters, but also urges all United Nations member-states to ensure full participation of women at all levels of decision-making in conflict resolution and peace processes. In line with its provisions, a number of countries emerging from armed internal conflict have adopted mechanisms for affirmative action, such as quotas and reserved seats, to guarantee women representation in political institutions. In some of these countries, women have attained an unprecedented level of representation in politics, putting the countries concerned ahead of many industrialized democracies in terms of women's presence in formal political institutions. Whether this has increased women's effective participation in decision-making, however, remains an open question.

Burundi and Nepal have both adopted affirmative action after protracted armed internal conflicts, increasing women's political representation after the first post-conflict elections. But,

to what extent has quota adoption enhanced the ability of women to participate in decision-making in these two countries?

**Burundi.** In 2005, Burundi emerged from an eleven-year ethnically motivated civil war, which pitted the Tutsi-dominated government army against several Hutu-based rebel groups. As in other parts of Africa, women are a massively disadvantaged group in Burundi, traditionally excluded from public and political life. Despite active lobbying by women's civil society organizations, women were limited to an official observer status during Burundi's peace negotiations. Yet, many of their initiatives were recognized by the negotiating parties, among them being the demand for 30% women's representation in national political institutions, which eventually was incorporated in the new constitution that was adopted through referendum in February 2005.

Between June and August of 2005, Burundi held four rounds of democratic elections. A considerable number of women participated in the electoral process – as polling-station agents, election monitors, voters, campaigners and candidates. As stipulated in the new constitution, women secured 36 out of 118 seats in the National Assembly (30.5%), and 17 of a total of 49 seats in the Senate (34.7%). Women were also rewarded with 7 out of 20 government posts (35%), and appointed to lead ministries that previously had been the exclusive domain of men. Since the 2005 elections, women still occupy several important positions in national political institutions, and the 30% quota has largely been upheld and respected. Nevertheless, while acknowledging the symbolic importance of women's presence in political institutions, representatives from political parties and civil society have argued that the numerical representation of women is not reflective of their ability to participate effectively in Burundian politics.

While most male political leaders assert that women are free to join and take leadership positions in their parties without restrictions, Burundi's political culture is not conducive to women's active participation. According to Burundian culture, women are not expected to talk in public, and those who do so risk being stigmatized for behaving inappropriately. Female party members thus often appear to be subordinate to their male colleagues, and tend to be excluded from decision-making positions and forums.

While women's representation in higher echelons of party structures has increased somewhat in recent years, the leadership of the major political parties is still almost exclusively a male domain. There is also a widespread belief that women in political office have only been put there to fulfil quota requirements. In addition, lack of economic independence, time constraints due to dual professional and domestic responsibilities, and limited education and training further inhibit women's effective political participation and advancement in Burundi.

**Nepal.** Between 1996 and 2006, Nepal experienced an armed internal conflict between the Nepali government and the Communist Party of Nepal–Maoist. While women were severely affected by the conflict – as victims, rebel fighters and peacebuilders at the grassroots level – they were not included as mediators, participants, observers or signatories in the peace negotiations, which in November 2006 culminated in a Comprehensive Peace Accord. After a protracted debate over the political inclusion of traditionally marginalized groups, however, the 2007 Interim Constitution facilitated the entry of women into political institutions by mandating that a minimum of one-third of the seats in the new legislature should be filled by women.

Nepali women had been traditionally marginalized from public and political life, so the elections to a new Constituent Assembly in 2008 represented a milestone and an important victory. Altogether, nearly 3,500 women contested in the elections, comprising 35% of all candidates. After the elections, women obtained one-third of the seats, 197 out of a total of 601, in the new Constituent Assembly. Two years after the 2008 elections, women still hold 33% of the seats in this legislative body. Women are also represented in each of the eleven thematic committees that have been set up to discuss the draft of a new constitution, giving them an unprecedented opportunity to influence national decision-making and the development of a new constitution for the country.

However, although there are some influential women within the Constituent Assembly, there is in reality only limited space for women in Nepali politics, and four main barriers impede their impact on political decision-making. First, decisions in political parties continue to be made by a handful of senior male leaders, and, although women are active to varying ex-



Newly elected female members of Nepal's Constituent Assembly, Kathmandu, May 2008.  
Photo: WAPPDCA.

tents in all of the major political parties, women's participation in higher levels of the parties' decision-making committees is negligible. Second, despite the existence of women's wings in most political parties and also an Inter-Party Women's Alliance, women politicians find it hard to raise issues of particular concern to women in the Constituent Assembly. Third, limited education and literacy, along with a lack of political experience and knowledge of the political system, further hinder the ability of many female politicians to participate effectively in the political process. Finally, as in Burundi, women's ability to participate in political institutions is limited by a prevailing perception that the increase in women's representation was primarily a response to legal requirements, not the result of a determination to improve gender equality in politics.

### Lessons Learned

The cases of Burundi and Nepal illustrate that affirmative action can be an effective mechanism to accelerate women's representation in formal politics. In both countries, women were earlier only marginally represented in political institutions, but following the introduction of minimum requirements for women's representation there has been a substantial increase of women in national political institutions. The quota system has lowered some of the structural barriers

that limited women's access to political positions. Moreover, it has made political institutions more inclusive and women more visible in an arena dominated by men. Accordingly, it has not only challenged the norm that politics is a masculine sphere, but also raised awareness among women about their opportunities and rights to take part in decision-making.

However, while quota adoption has been an important step for increasing women's political participation, the two case studies clearly demonstrate that increased representation via affirmative action does not necessarily translate into meaningful participation and enhanced influence for women in politics. Affirmative action does not by itself alter stereotypical perceptions of women's skills and performance or encourage a gender division of responsibility in political institutions. The use of quotas has been contentious, and there is a tendency for male politicians to regard the women's quota as a ceiling rather than a floor for women's political representation. This has weakened women's position and credibility as political representatives, and has led to a widespread belief that they are 'tokens' rather than agents for change within political parties.

In Burundi and Nepal, as in many other developing countries, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and practices continue to subjugate wom-

en, disadvantaging them in the political sphere. Women are taught to behave in a subordinate fashion towards the male-dominated political leadership, making it difficult to demand space and bring forward initiatives related to women's particular interests and needs. Women's leadership energies are thus to a large extent isolated in parties' women's wings and interparty women's caucuses, whose secondary status prevents them from effectively provoking the political leadership into operationalizing gender-equality goals or recognizing the value of women's participation in the political realm beyond women's issues.

Burundi and Nepal are also characterized by deeply ingrained gender inequalities, in which women's low status manifests itself in a number of ways that affect women's ability to participate in politics. In both countries, political campaigns require solid financial backing for success, and women's lack of access to sufficient financial resources reduces their opportunities for both political engagement and advancement. Women's disproportionate household burdens further limit their ability to participate effectively in politics. As in most developing countries, Burundian and Nepali women are expected by their husbands to uphold their traditional roles as wives and mothers. For female politicians, the dual burdens of domestic tasks and professional obligations thus limit the time that they can allot to political activities. Political parties do not recognize or accommodate this dual role, and women who focus on their careers are often judged negatively for going against the norm. Furthermore, many of the women who entered political institutions after the first post-conflict elections in Burundi and Nepal are relatively or completely new to politics, and limited education and a lack of political experience constitute great obstacles for political advancement.

The levels of women's political representation are higher today in Burundi and Nepal, but ensuring that the work of these newly elected women is substantive remains a challenge. The implementation of affirmative action has not eradicated entrenched cultural and traditional authorities that discriminate against women. Most women continue to be trapped in a traditional role that discourages visibility in the public and political spheres. In order to overcome the persistent gap between commitments to and de facto gender equality in politics, broader cultural and institutional changes are required, along with a qualitative increase in women's capabilities.

## Emerging Recommendations

While progress has been made to follow up on Resolution 1325's provisions to increase women's involvement in decision-making, a host of remaining challenges will need to be addressed if women are to be able to participate effectively in post-conflict political decision-making in Burundi and Nepal.

### Governments

While affirmative action has lowered some of the structural barriers for women's participation in formal politics, the political environments of Burundi and Nepal are not conducive to women's effective participation. In order to build space for women to participate in and influence political decision-making, it is essential that the governments of these countries:

- **Promote women's participation in political decision-making.** Beyond the adoption of quotas, the governments should work proactively and undertake public campaigns to increase the understanding of affirmative action as an integral part of efforts to achieve gender equality and democratic governance, and provide resources to all parties for training of women in the skills required to become political candidates and leaders.
- **Mandate increased women's representation in leadership positions.** Both governments should introduce policies that mandate political parties to better integrate measures for gender equality in their leadership structures and political platforms, and ensure that women participate and hold decision-making positions in all committees, commissions and other political forums.

### Political Parties

Political parties are the main gatekeepers for women's political participation. Political parties decide who will be listed on a ballot and in what place, and are the arena where policies are debated and decided upon. In order to advance women's effective participation within this realm, political parties should thus:

- **Implement measures to enhance gender equality.** In order to change male-dominated political cultures, all political parties should adopt appropriate measures and policies, such as party quotas, transparent criteria and party-list placement to promote women's voices, along with funding for women candidates and women party members. Political parties should adopt rules mandating gender balance in their party management and policy committees, and train all political candidates in gender issues. Parties should also examine how they can create a more enabling environment for women to engage in politics – for example, by introducing measures and working hours that allow women and men to contribute equally to decision-making processes, and organizing capacity-building and leadership training for female politicians.
- **Include women in decision-making bodies.** In order to ensure and advance women's participation, political parties should adopt internal decision-making structures that are democratic rather than closed, and encourage women to bring their voices and concerns to political discussions and forums, also on issues that are not gender-related.

### International Actors

International actors have played crucial roles in the advancement of women's participation in political decision-making in Burundi and Nepal. Yet, the international community should not rest on its laurels. Within their mandates, international actors should:

- **Encourage gender balance in political institutions.** International actors should encourage the Burundian and Nepali governments to comply with international laws and agreements, including UN Security Council Resolution 1325, and to adopt a more gender-inclusive approach in decision-making. Donors should encourage heads of government to exercise gender parity in executive appointments, signal to governments that aid is conditional on good-faith efforts to involve women in decision-making, and promote the collection of gender-disaggregated data on women in politics and other channels of political influence.
- **Assist gender-mainstreaming in political parties.** With the aim of promoting gender equality inside political parties, international actors should make the case for the importance of gender equality in decision-making in their dialogues with the governments and political parties, and support training on gender-related issues that includes both female and male political party members.

- **Support women's political capacity-building.** In order to strengthen female politicians' ability to participate effectively in decision-making, the international donor community should support activities and training aimed at increasing women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership, and support activities that may assist women in overcoming the financial barrier related to electoral campaigns. Furthermore, international actors should stimulate and facilitate networking with women's civil society organizations, support programmes to develop cross-party cooperation and policies among women members of parliament, and encourage exchange of information and best practices on ways to advance women's participation in politics. ■

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### THE PROJECT

This policy brief forms part of a project entitled 'Resolution 1325 and Women's Political Participation,' and is derived from a larger report on women's participation in post-conflict decision-making in Burundi and Nepal. The full report may be downloaded from: <http://www.prio.no/CSCW/People/Person/?oid=77832>.

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