Global Aspects of Women’s Political Participation

In the wake of World War II three major political trends have formed international development; the human rights revolution, the diffusion of democracy, and the growing acceptance of gender equality. All three trends have contributed to significant increases in women’s participation, representation and influence. Yet great contrasts persist in women’s ability to exercise the rights which the international community of states has bestowed upon them.

**Brief Points**

- Three global trends have formed international development since World War II: the human rights revolution, the diffusion of democracy, and the growing acceptance of gender equality.
- These trends have proven to be of great benefit to women’s political advancement in many regions of the world.
- Political systems which allow for civil society organizations’ participation, particularly women’s organizations, provide women with more influence.
- Despite the fact that the idea of gender equality has won greater acceptance, there continue to be many obstacles to women’s participation and representation.

Helga Hernes

*Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)*
In the wake of World War II three major political trends have formed international development. All three trends have, in different ways, made an impact on women’s political status and participation.

**Human rights revolution**

The first political trend is the significant shift from the norm of sovereignty as the fundamental and decisive norm for states’ relations with each other, towards one where human rights achieved status as a competing norm. Sovereignty had non-intervention and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states as its central premise. States were regarded as unitary and independent actors. The belief – held almost universally – that a state’s treatment of its people was not a legitimate international concern has undergone profound change since the end of World War II. Individuals have to some extent become subjects as well as objects of international legal rules. The development of a significant body of human rights law has transformed individual citizens into legitimate members of the international community with rights of their own, rights they can appeal to and support, and rights that are universal and encoded as such. Rights that state’s can use to interfere into one another’s affairs - in the extreme case through “humanitarian interventions.” And last but not least, rights that individual men and women can use as legitimate references when addressing and appealing to their own governments, thus impacting upon the domestic politics of the state concerned. Individual rights open up for opportunities, but their development and application frequently creates national and international tensions between the primacy of state sovereignty and the protection of fundamental human rights.

Still “states remain the key actors in making, breaking and enforcing international rules.” A state’s sovereign rights cannot be violated without recourse to the UN Charter. Conversely, a state cannot violate the human rights of its citizens by mere reference to the principle of sovereignty. The normative framework of international human rights law, though at times anthithetical to the traditional conception of state sovereignty, is in most cases still subordinate to it. This fact might explain why states are at all willing to make international commitments as to how to treat their own citizens.

The horrors of the Holocaust led to overwhelming attention being given to human rights at the UN conference in San Francisco resulting in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948. As to be expected there were concerns and several disagreements concerning the wording about possible future “interventions in matters that are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of the State concerned” as John Foster Dulles noted. It is also significant that states and non-state actors cooperated in the drafting process, establishing thus an early precedent for the legitimacy of international non-governmental organizations. The participation of non-state actors was crucial for the adoption of the UDHR, and for subsequent human rights legislation. And their number and status has increased significantly since then. Absolute sovereignty is challenged in several ways and international organizations are by now central actors. 1948 was an important year for establishing the legitimacy of international human rights, yet it took 30 years before the major conventions establishing and specifying these rights were adopted. The breadth of international legal rules in many different fields is steadily increasing, and international organizations, not state agreements or conventions, are now the major source of international law.

Yet there is increasing concern and skepticism by states when it comes to new human rights commitments, in particular mechanisms of individual complaints, whereby citizens can take their own complaints to international courts. Governments have shown reluctance to enter into new human rights commitments. This is true both of small states such as Norway and bigger states, especially the United States, and also European powers. Governments are increasingly concerned that they might lose control over their own legal development as well as parliamentary control over their own legislation. There are increasing signs of a lack of trust between governments and international supervisory bodies.

**Diffusion of democracy**

The second international trend is that of democratization which began in Western Europe at the end of the Second World War, when few European states were democratic. The spread of democracy first throughout Western Europe, then to other parts of the world, and finally with the end of the Cold War to Eastern and Central Europe, has made many governments accountable to citizen voters. Of course: democratization is not yet a global phenomenon, important exceptions exist. But democratic states’ accountability, both in regard to each other and in regard to their citizens, is a central aspect of global political development. Granting women political rights was part of this process of democratization, although there are several cases where also semi-autocratic regimes have adopted women-friendly legislation. The General Assembly passed the Convention on the Political Rights of Women in 1952, although it must be noted that gender equality was, until very recently, by no means automatically regarded as a natural aspect of democratic development by UN member states. It would take many decades before women themselves used their political rights for other purposes than voting in elections. Very few women were put up as candidates for office, and even fewer were elected. And the UN has as an organization by no means shown more than a marginal interest in appointing women to high-level positions in its own staff, or to its many missions abroad.

Decades of decolonization led to a great increase in the number of sovereign states (from 51 in 1945 to 193 in 2011) though not necessarily democratic ones. The end of the Cold War in 1989 brought about years of political instability. Yet many civil wars ended in political settlements, which led to a new era of constitution writing, usually granting women equal political rights. The act of constitution making was a process of democratization, mobilization, and organizational innovation for both men and women. The mobilizing effect of rallying around the constitutional processes in many countries outside of Europe has strengthened civil society organizations, especially women’s organizations. Although women’s rights were for many years not regarded as central to the main body of human rights broadly understood, the process of constitution making in some parts of the world raised and sharpened the awareness of “women’s rights as human rights”, to cite a popular slogan of the 1990s. Mere awareness and knowledge of the increasing body of international human rights and women’s rights has played an important
role in the domestic politics of constitution making.

**Growing acceptance of gender equality**

The third trend is the gradual internationalization, institutionalization and codification of gender equality during the past five decades. There is no doubt that the women’s movement in the United States, which started around 1965 and in the seventies, spread first to the Nordic countries then to the rest of Europe, triggered this trend. The activism of women in other parts of the world, such as Africa, South America and Asia, came often as a reaction against this perceived Western dominance, and resulted in a number of organizational alliances across borders and continents. This process was augmented further during the series of UN Women’s Conferences in Mexico (1975), in Copenhagen (1980), in Nairobi (1985) and in Beijing (1995). The decade from 1985 to 1995 was declared as the International Women’s Decade, leading up to the Beijing Platform of Action, adopted in 1995. These four conferences put gender equality on the international agenda, and raised the political status of women. Until then gender equality had not been regarded as an integral part of democratization, and as pointed out above, women’s rights were not given the same status as human rights, generally speaking. The year 2015 will be an important year in regard to confirming the international status of gender equality; there will be events celebrating several milestones: the twentieth anniversary of the Beijing Platform, the tenth anniversary of the UN Millennium Goals, and the 15th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on “Women, Peace and Security.”

The UN Women’s conferences have had an enormous impact. Norms were set, networks and organizations were established, demands were formulated, and innovative political ideas were launched. Towns makes a good case for her claim that there has been an enormous shift over the past decades in the acceptance of gender equality as a standard for states’ behavior. States’ performance in regard to gender equality affects and contributes to their ranking in the international hierarchy of states. Nordic governments put emphasis on their considerable achievements in regard to the political, social and economic status of women both at home and in their foreign policies. Gender equality as an ingredient of a nations’ positive profile is no longer limited to development policies, but has advanced to become an important symbol of modernity.

One of the most important and lasting instruments is CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women) that entered into force in 1981, four years after the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as The International Covenant on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights, both adopted in 1976. Gender equality as an international standard and goal enables women to appeal to a body of internationally perceived common values (rather than the good will of men) to redress their grievances. The greatest formal weakness of these Conventions and Covenants is of course their lack of enforcement, the weak enforcement provisions, and the very limited time states use to monitor, deliberate and deepen their commitment to their provisions. CEDAW signatories meet for a mere two weeks each year to review the status of enforcement. Yet CEDAW’s recommendations are applied and enforced through the International Criminal Court and the Rome Statutes. On the national level governments’ ratification of CEDAW has made little difference where conditions for women’s mobilization do not exist. But in countries where women have the opportunity to use international law, CEDAW has proved to be a powerful and mobilizing weapon, along with the other Conventions referred to above. In some ways these three conventions reflect global common values, although the number of states that have stated reservations to CEDAW, specifically with regards to family law and especially by significant countries, for example the United States who have not signed or ratified CEDAW, make it clear that gender equality is not yet an established universal value when it comes to practical politics.

However, in many instances effective legal enforcement is not the only or even major goal or concern of those who invoke their rights either individually or collectively. Treaties are also an important inspiration and resource that can be used politically. The political uses of the law as a normative construct or as part of political rhetoric are often as effective as legal enforcement. And their use might therefore bring about domestic change. Individual and collective rights have become part of the political vocabulary of many interested parties, states, international organizations, advocacy groups and individuals. Advocacy networks, although unable to create human rights law, may be of crucial importance for agenda setting purposes, and providing normative arguments for domestic interest groups, in some cases contributing to institutional change. The combination of a growing body of international norms as well as the significant growth of global and regional networks of women’s organizations which learn from each other, refer to each other and support each other has brought about the development of what we might call an international civil society of women. Women’s organizations have by no means focused solely on parliaments as strategic arenas but on all kinds of public service positions in political, social, administrative and organizational settings. And they have created influential international networks.

**The effect of trends and developments**

These trends are: the shift from the norm of sovereignty as the only constitutive norm of the society of states to that of human rights as competing if not quite equal norms; the accompanying growth of international organizations as significant global actors; the spread of democracy which has become the most frequent form of government - albeit in many different forms - and the internationalization and codification of gender equality that have fundamentally influenced the contemporary international community.

How then have these trends and developments affected women’s political status and participation “on the ground” so to speak? As is to be expected there are great variations in women’s participation across the globe. Women’s right to political inclusion is firmly established in many international conventions and other documents. International norms on women’s rights that have developed over the past decades have had an impact in many countries, especially for women coming out of conflict in Africa, and also in Latin America, and some Asian countries. They have made it easier for local women to argue for the inclusion of these norms into constitutions and other official documents such as peace agreements, cease fire agreements, etc. In most countries it has taken decades before
women’s political rights have had any practical consequence beyond voting in elections. In most countries - including the Nordic ones - it was not until the 1970s that women started to use their political rights, and insisted on the translation of these rights into political decision making power, asserting that democracies were not democratic if only one of the two genders, namely men, ran the affairs of state. In 1986, Norway became the first country in the world with a gender-balanced government with Gro Harlem Brundtland as Prime Minister.

Women’s participation has taken many forms, and we would not be where we are now without the activism of women’s own organizations around the world. Transitions to democracy have rarely included women a political role in that process: they were fought for and demanded as a right by women themselves. Women’s demands and agenda’s are most often negotiated first among women, then followed up and monitored through a variety of formal and informal channels. Yet in most parts of the world women’s political and social demands are propagated by organizations whose membership consists mainly of women. There are many obstacles to women’s participation: traditions and customs that demand public silence on the part of women; the threat or reality of violence more widespread across the globe than we like to think; stereotypes that say that “politics is too dirty for women”; the cost of campaigning for political office is still very high in many countries of the world, and exclusive power arenas such as men’s clubs and professional organizations serve as a power base for men only. It is for these reasons that women create their own organizations.

The three global trends and standards that have evolved since the end of the Second World War: the human rights revolution, the diffusion of democracy, and the growing acceptance of gender equality, have contributed to significant increases in women’s participation, representation and influence. Yet great contrasts persist in women’s ability to exercise the rights of the international community of states has bestowed upon them. These contrasts are largely due to governments’ willingness or lack thereof to abide by their commitments. It seems that states get more benefits from signing and ratifying treaties than they do from implementing them! There are in most instances few if any costs involved in signing treaties concerning equality issues. On the other hand the benefits of being considered a respected member of the society of states should not be underestimated. Many governments will reserve themselves against certain clauses without risking loss of prestige. “Shaming and blaming” are no longer considered to be useful tools in international discourse. Governments count on the fact that they will not be “caught” or criticized. Yet CEDAW has actually achieved a few “victories” in this respect.

The state of affairs

The trends I discuss have proven to be of great benefit to women’s political advancement, if not in all then in many regions of the world. International legal standards and instruments have been important both in court cases, but even more important as inspiration for organizing on behalf of political demands. It is therefore not surprising that in political systems, which allow for civil society organizations’ participation, women will have more clout and more influence. And women’s organizations have proven to be more effective than organizations that consist of women and men when it comes to working for women’s interests. Again, this is not surprising.

The idea of gender equality, of the claim that men and women should be treated equally as citizens with the same rights and obligations, has won acceptance in a growing number of societies, if by no means all. As I stated above, the claim that gender equality is an integral part of democracy is relatively new, as is the idea that women’s rights are human rights. And while women in all countries will continue to have less money and power than men for a long time to come, will be subject to more gender based violence than men in all parts of the world, and will continue to be discriminated in almost all countries: there is now greater awareness of the injustice of this state of affairs.

Notes

3 Joyner, Ibid. p. 293.
7 Simmons, Ibid. s. 254.