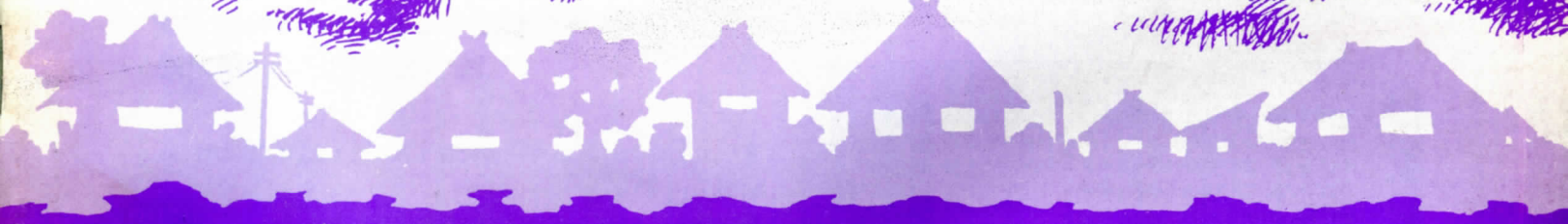


WOMEN in ACTION



international

1/94



WOMEN IN POLITICS

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1/94



international

Women in Politics

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Dear Friends,

*This issue of **Women in Action** focuses on the role of women in politics in the different regions. Because this topic has a very broad scope, we have limited the coverage to two main areas: women in electoral politics and women in community politics. We have selected articles which take a look at the significance of women's participation in local and national government systems and the extent women influence policies and legislations.*

We have also included articles that describe women's political actions at the community level. Are these efforts outside established political institutions and parties more effective? Should these take precedence over legislative campaigns at the national level?

In addition, we felt that a more extensive coverage should be given to women in Eastern Europe and the Middle East since they are in a unique position of testing the waters of new democracies. Likewise, after the 1989 democratic revolution, women in Mongolia have played a stronger role in political decision making.

As far as women's political participation is concerned, high political positions and the individual successes of women in party politics do not guarantee a change in women's political status and their ability to exercise their political rights. For real transformation to take place, we must start in the community. It is in an activist role that women can make a difference.

One of the most successful ways women have been able to influence politics has been through the formation of strong women organizations with the capacity to pressure and lobby political parties and bodies. Two major questions that women are exploring today are that of raising women politicians from the ranks of the activists women's movement and that of establishing stronger and mutually supportive linkages between women in electoral politics and women activists in the global women's movement.

Establishing linkages between women in electoral and community politics would mean substantive and meaningful participation of women in politics. We welcome our readers to share their experiences and views with us on this issue.

Isis International - Manila

Rural Women in Australia Develop Health Materials

WID in India

Dear Sisters,

We are a rural women's health service based in Victoria, Australia. We provide information, training, books, videos and pamphlets to the women of our region.

We also develop programmes, workshops and training modules. As a result of working with women in many aspects of women's health, we have developed a range of health materials which we want to make available to as many women as possible.

We are a non-profit, non-government organisation funded by the Commonwealth of Australia. We have only women members and work from a feminist philosophy, employing feminist principles; so all our work is grounded in women's experiences.

I enclose a copy of our resource listing for your perusal. I look forward to hearing from you as to how you might be able to assist us in the wider distribution of our materials.

Your sincerely,

Jude Jackson
Coordinator, Loddon Campaspe
Women's Health Service, Inc.
31 Mackenzie Street
Bendigo
Victoria 3550
Australia

All interested women's groups or individuals should contact Loddon Campaspe Women's Health Service for the invaluable health materials they have produced. - Editor

Dear Friends,

Initiatives: Women in Development (IWID) is an organisation which was formed in 1989 with the aim of strengthening NGO efforts at women's development in India. Its main activities include gender training, organisational development from a gender perspective and research and documentation on women's issues.

More recently, we have started networking with women's organisations in Asia so that we can learn from the experiences of other Asian countries. In this regard we would be grateful if you could send us any literature on the activities of your organisation and status of women and women's development efforts in your country.

Please let us know whether you bring out any periodicals/journals in English. As of now IWID does not bring out any periodicals but we bring out our workshop reports/research papers on women and development periodically. With warm regards,

Yours sincerely,

Ranjani K. Murthy
IWID
E2, B Block, 4th Floor
Parsn Paradise Apts.
109 G.N. Chetty Road
T. Nagar, Madras 600 017
India

It is always good to receive news from women's groups all over the world. Are there any women's groups who would like to share their experiences of women and development in their own country with IWID? - Editor

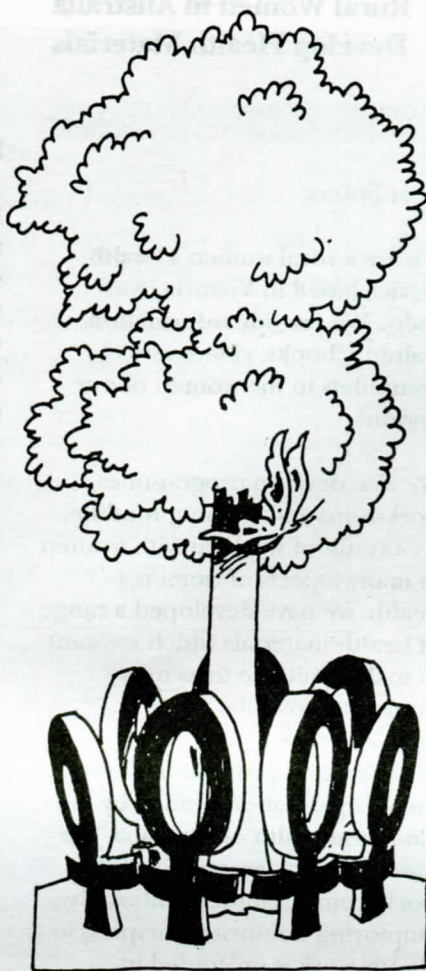
MEF Call on All Women's Groups.....

Dear Sisters,

We saw a short description of your organization in "The Tribune" February 1993 and are writing for more information about Isis International.

The Melanesian Environment Foundation (MEF) is a non government organization working to raise awareness of environmental issues in Papua New Guinea. Our work primarily focuses on the issues of logging, mining and dynamite fishing and is conducted by youth in schools and with people in villages. Over the past year and a half MEF has made a concerted effort to involve and strengthen the women. We have begun to address some basic issues that keep women from the work: violence against women, childcare, health including family planning and feelings of shame, jealousy and fear that greatly shape the women's lives. These issues have not been totally resolved but have been dealt with significantly that the women have now begun to participate in the awareness work on a regular basis rather than office support work only.

In our early stages of planning the women's program we need information from other women's groups like yours that will help to strengthen our understanding of women's relationship to the environment, models to help us develop ways to work with groups of village women and ways to help the men feel less threatened and more supportive. We are interested in receiving your issues and information pack on the



environment and what women are doing to protect it.

We realize we are asking for a lot but please understand that any informational support you can provide us now or in the future will be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Joyce David and Gerry Pearson
Women's Program, Melanesian
Environment Foundation, Inc.
P.O. Box 4830
Boroko, NCD
Papua New Guinea

✍ We enjoin all our sisters and friends to send information to MEF regarding women and the environment. Good luck to you on your women's program. - Editor

Ugandan Women Find a Voice in Soroti

Dear Editor,

We are a newly formed women's NGO, Soroti Women's Development Association (SWODA) whose main objectives among others is to uplift, empower, promote and improve the status and wellbeing of women and children in Soroti District especially after the civil strife which seriously underplayed whatever chances of development that could have taken place.

We have on several occasions come across some of your publications which we have found to be very useful.

We understand that copies are distributed free to women's groups in countries in the South. We would be very grateful if you could include us on your mailing list and send us at least two copies of your publication. We would particularly like to receive copies of **Women in Action 2 & 3/93** on women and migration.

Looking forward to hearing from you soon. Thank you for a job well done. Very kind regards.

Yours faithfully,

Deborah Ossiya
General Secretary, SWODA
P.O. Box 6655
Kampala
Uganda

✍ Congratulations on your new endeavour. Once again women show a nation that with our collective energy and will-power we can do it for ourselves. - Editor

Paths to Empowerment: Women and Political Participation

By Marilee Karl

Political participation is a major path to women's empowerment: to increased decision-making power and greater ability to influence matters that affect our lives in the community and the larger society. In the broad sense, participation in politics goes far beyond electoral politics: voting and election to public office.

Women's political participation is greatest in grassroots and community organizations, in non-governmental and people's organizations, in feminist organizations and networks, in workers' movements and in other social and political movements for the transformation of society. Often comprising the majority of participants, women are in the forefront of the environmental, peace, human rights, consumers and other movements. Women have mobilized in massive numbers to contribute to liberation movements and movements for democracy.

When it comes to leadership and decision-making positions within most of these organizations and movements, women are a distinct minority. This situation, however, is beginning to change. The growing strength of the global women's movement and increasing gender awareness is forcing many organizations and movements to examine their explicit or implicit discrimination against women. Women are forcing not only male-dominated structures but also processes to change.

Moreover, women have successfully incorporated their perspectives into many organizations and movements and have brought their issues to the agenda. In the field of human rights, for instance, women successfully mobilized to bring women's rights as human rights onto the international agenda of the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in

June 1993 and incorporated their demands into the Vienna Declaration. This effort was the result of women's worldwide mobilization at the local, national, regional and international levels.

Women have also brought significant changes to movements for liberation and democracy, which in the past have frequently considered women's concerns to be secondary or divisive issues. Women have forced these movements to make the struggle against oppression of women a priority, to be carried on simultaneously with other struggles.

Further, women in non-governmental organizations and people's movements have refused to be confined to so-called 'women's issues' in the narrow sense, but are affirming the right to bring women's perspectives to all issues.

Women in electoral politics

While women are increasingly mobilizing and empowering themselves in groups, organizations, networks and movements worldwide, women's participation in electoral politics is significantly smaller.

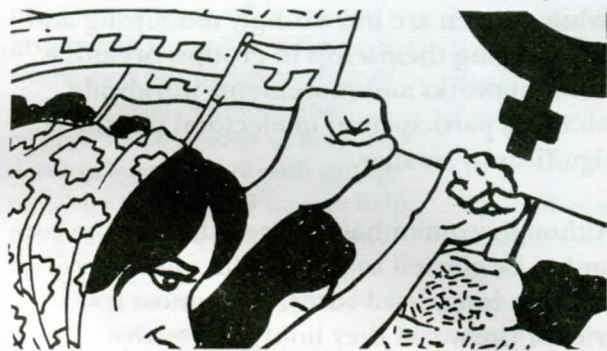
Although women have gained the right to vote and to be elected to public office - often through long, hard struggle - in most countries of the world they hold few elective



positions from the local to the national levels. Worldwide they comprise only 10 per cent of members of parliament. And while figures are difficult to come by at levels below national parliaments, women make up an extremely small minority of the representatives in legislative bodies at any level. The same is true for other elected or appointed political offices from village councilors to town mayors to cabinet ministers.

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which regularly gathers statistics on the numbers of men and women in parliaments, women held more than 20 per cent of parliamentary seats in only 11 of the 171 national parliaments that existed as of June 1993. Seychelles led the list with 11 women or 45.8 per cent of the 24 members of its single chamber. The other countries are: Finland (39 per cent), Norway (35.8 per cent), Sweden (33.5 per cent), Denmark (33 per cent), the Netherlands (29.3 per cent), Iceland (23.8 per cent), Cuba (22.8 per cent), Austria (21.3 per cent), China (21 per cent) and Germany (20.5 per cent). Women held less than four per cent of parliamentary seats in 36 countries.

Overall the total number of women parliamentarians in the world has dropped from nearly 13 per cent in 1989 to 10.1 per cent in 1993. The greatest decrease has been in the former socialist states of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union which have gone from one-party to multi-party systems. Some of the decreases have been dramatic, from 34 per cent to less than 4 per cent in Romania. One explanation for this is that the real power in these countries was not in the parliaments but in the decision-making bodies of the one party



that controlled the government. In these bodies, women accounted for only about five per cent of the leadership.

At the ministerial level, women hold only about four per cent of positions worldwide. In 1990, women held more than 20 per cent of ministerial posts in only four countries: Bhutan, Colombia, Norway and Sweden, ten per cent or more in another 17 countries, and no posts at all in over 80 countries. Most of the ministries headed by women are in the areas traditionally considered women's concerns, such as health, welfare, culture, education and women's affairs. Since such ministries often have a low priority in many countries, women in these ministries are hampered by lack of financial and human resources. Nevertheless, they have been able to make substantial contributions in these fields, but have been prevented from doing likewise by their exclusion from ministries in the areas of economics, finance, justice, defense and foreign affairs.

Although few women reach the position of president or prime minister of their country, several women have played prominent roles in world politics as heads of state or government. One need think only of Indira Gandhi or Margaret Thatcher. However, most women who have reached these positions are lone women at the top and few have made special efforts to clear the path for more women to reach high levels of government. An exception is Gro Brundtland who, as prime minister of Norway, appointed a cabinet with 50 per cent women.

Obstacles to women's political participation

Why are there so few women in elected or appointed government positions? There are several major reasons for this. For one thing the whole political culture and style is male-



Grace de Jesus-Sievert

dominated and alien to women. In most countries women have a shorter history of participation in electoral politics than men and less experience in campaigning, public debate and relations with the mass media. And many women are themselves ambivalent about entering the political fray.

When women do enter electoral politics, they face innumerable obstacles and deeply ingrained gender discrimination at all levels. This begins with political parties which are a major path to election or political appointment. While women make up a substantial portion of party membership in most countries, few women hold leadership positions and are seldom put forward as candidates for elections. Participation in party activities is frequently incompatible with family and household responsibilities which still fall mainly on the shoulders of women: for instance, meetings are held late at night and child care is not provided. Moreover, women face discrimination and exclusion from positions of power. Women have been able to band together to challenge this situation and demand change in only a few places.

Women's weak economic position is also an obstacle: few women have access either to substantial funds of their own or to other sources of funds, and generally lack the experience or the connections needed to raise the money for running a successful political campaign.

Women also encounter many obstacles on another major pathway to political participation: that of the national and international civil service. While women form a large portion of the secretarial and lower professional levels in many countries, they find their way blocked to high levels of the civil service by the usual manifestations of gender discrimination. Interestingly, in the United Nations system,

women make up about 40 per cent of the lower professional levels when entrance is through examination, but the percentage of women declines dramatically on the higher levels where positions are filled by appointment from middle-level professionals or from the outside.

Political power today is increasingly exercised by government bureaucracies and high political offices are often filled by appointments from the top levels of the civil service, so that women's exclusion from this sphere significantly weakens their opportunities for political participation and power.

Given the prevailing situation in electoral politics, many women have opted to work for political and social change outside the system. However, an increasing number of women have felt this work needs to be complemented by strengthening their positions within the political power system. Without decision-making power and control at all levels, the gains women have made are too easily ignored and eroded. Too many of the major economic and political decisions in the world are being made without the input of women. There is a growing conviction of the need to influence policy and political decisions not only through lobbying and other actions on the outside, but through wielding political power in decision-making positions too.

What difference do women make?

Looking at the few women who have made it to the top in politics, it would seem that women politicians do not behave very differently from men in the same positions. While



Grace de Jesus-Sievert

there are exceptions to this, women who are isolated in political positions, either because they are one of only a small percentage of women in politics or because they have no links with women's organizations, do not bring distinctive issues

or perspectives to the agenda. In fact, such women sometimes go to some length to deny that they might have any different concerns or ways of doing things because they are women. Many will announce plainly that "I am not a feminist". In their situations, any taint of feminism could be deadly to their political career. As a tiny minority among male politicians, women sometimes internalize the dominant male political culture and find that they have to be better than men at playing the male political game in order to succeed.

Women also represent a wide range of political views from left to right and women politicians are by no means all progressive. Many women in politics come from an elite and have more in common with men of their own class than with the disadvantaged majority of women. Moreover, women face a world dominated by powerful economic and political forces on which it is difficult for anyone to make an impact.

However, where there is a critical mass of women in politics - 30 per cent or more - as in several countries of Scandinavia, women can and do make a difference in politics, especially when they are linked with strong women's organizations. A strong women's movement and gender awareness in society also creates a climate in which women politicians are able to bring about changes in the political processes and issues.

A critical mass of women in politics can bring to the agenda issues of crucial concern to women which are often otherwise neglected or relegated to second place: contraception,

women sometimes internalize the dominant male political culture and find that they have to be better than men at playing the male political game in order to succeed

abortion, violence against women, gender discrimination, maternity leave, child care. Women legislators are more responsive than men to the needs of all persons in society, especially women, children, the elderly, the other-abled, minori-

ties and the disadvantaged, and are more concerned with issues such as environment, education and welfare. A strong group of women in politics can make a difference by bringing women's perspectives to all issues on the political agenda: foreign affairs, economics, trade, justice, military, peace, etc.

Where there are significant numbers of women in public office, they have successfully transformed not only the political agenda, but processes. Studies have shown that women in politics tend to be more practical and realistic, more open to working collectively and to change. Women's perspectives and priorities change the working climate of politics and make it possible for both women and men to engage in political activity without having to sacrifice their personal lives and families.

Increasing women's participation in politics

A number of strategies and mechanisms are being used to increase women's participation in electoral politics. Some of these are mechanisms set up by government, such as quotas, while others are arising from the collective action of women.

Quotas

In a few countries, quotas or reserved seats in legislative bodies have been established for women. Such measures are controversial especially because the numbers of seats set aside for women are generally insignificant. It is all too easy to fill these with token women and then dismiss the question of gender disparity. Quotas can also be interpreted as a

ceiling for women. Nevertheless, this mechanism may be the only way that women can get a start in politics in some places.

Quotas have been used more successfully to increase the number of women in the leadership of political parties and in their election lists, particularly where there is already a strong group of women within the party pressing for changes. In Scandinavia, women party members can use their strength to demand quotas as a means to achieve gender parity. Several parties in Norway and Denmark, for instance, provide that 40 per cent of candidates be women; and in some countries women are voicing the demand for 50 per cent in party leadership and electoral lists.

Women's branches of parties

The influence of the global women's movement and growing gender awareness is changing the character of the women's sections of some political parties from the 'housekeeping branch' to strong organizations capable of making an impact on the party. Unfortunately, many women's branches are still limited mainly to pouring the tea and stuffing envelopes or, at best, to mobilizing the support of women for the party. Some women's organizations have also been coopted and weakened through absorption into the political party.

Women's political parties

Women have formed their own political parties in a number of countries, including Canada, Germany, Iceland, Nigeria, the Philippines, Russia and Spain. For the most part, these parties have served mainly as a venue for women to come together to organize and train themselves to work in politics. Most of them have been short-lived and have made little impact. However, the recently formed Women in Russia Party, whose party platform

included the restoration of social benefits such as free medical care and child care, received eight per cent of the vote in the December 1993 elections and obtained 25 seats in the lower house of the Russian parliament.

Autonomous women's political organizations

Women have also been organizing strong autonomous women's political organizations to support women candidates, lobby political parties, legislative bodies and governments, conduct educational campaigns, and provide training for women in politics. Some have been able to make alliances with political parties and other political organizations from a position of strength.

Women's units or ministries in government

During the United Nations Decade for Women, many countries established women's ministries or units. However, most of these were poorly funded and had little or no power to influence policy. Rather than strengthening women, many succeeded only in marginalizing them further. Today some of these units have been strengthened and given a mandate to endure gender awareness in other government units and bodies. For this purpose, several such women's units have undertaken gender awareness training with men and women in various government bodies.

Associations of women in politics

Women politicians have also organized themselves in caucuses or associations at different levels. On the international level, women members of the IPU have begun to hold a Meeting of Women Parliamentarians twice a year and have set forth demands for gender balance in its work and are developing a plan of action to address the imbalance of men and women in politics.

The strategies and mechanisms that women are using to

...in some countries women are voicing the demand for 50 per cent (candidature) in party leadership and electoral lists

increase their participation and power in politics are very specific to their particular situations and vary greatly from country to country and from local to district to national level. Women's efforts have resulted in only modest successes so far. Nevertheless, there is room for cautious hope for greater achievements in the future.



Women who have played a major part in movements for liberation and opposition to dictatorships have been keen to share the political power in the new governments. Although they are determined not to be dismissed once the struggle is over, the new governments have been, without exception, overwhelmingly composed of men.

In Namibia and South Africa women have been very vocal in their conviction that the new governments should not be sexist and that women must be fairly represented in them. Their efforts in this direction have included educational campaigns for women about their rights, gender awareness campaigns for both men and women, the formation of women's organizations that can act as training schools for women's political participation and as watch-dogs and pressure groups for women's rights in political parties and bodies. Women also called for a minimum of 30 per cent women among the candidates for election of the African National Congress (ANC) and formed coalitions for women's rights cutting across parties.

In Latin America where many countries moved from military dictatorships to parliamentary democracies in the 1980s, women have been

in the forefront of grassroots organizations and other political movements in opposition to the dictatorships. They found, however, that while almost all political parties gave lip service to women's rights, this was mainly a political ploy to get women's support and vote.

In Chile, women played a major part in the movement for the return of democracy and, as this gained momentum, women from all sectors and diverse political parties came together in an umbrella organization to formulate women's demands for inclusion in the party platforms. Their slogan was "For democracy in the home and in the country." However, the 1989 elections resulted in a parliament and government overwhelmingly dominated by men. In preparation for the 1993 elections, women strengthened their efforts to support the campaigns of women candidates and to build alliances with both men and women. One political action group, *Mas Mujeres al Parlamento* (More Women in Parliament), successfully supported the campaign of a woman running on an explicitly feminist platform.



Trade Union Congress

The challenges ahead

The road ahead is full of challenges for women's participation in politics. Strategies must be developed and strengthened to give women access decision-making positions within different political power structures. Strategies must also be developed to strengthen women as a constituency which can make its demands felt on political parties and governments and become a force to support women in politics.

Tanzanian Women's Role in Decision Making Policy

By Tabu Ndziku

In Tanzania the number of women in high level decision making fora is very small. Women constitute over 51 percent of the country's population of 23 million but they are very few in both party and government decision making bodies.

Women have been participating fully to defend and maintain the right of every Tanzanian as part of their liberation struggle. However they have never been fully involved in decision making policy. Although before independence women were participating fully in raising the country's economic growth they were not fully involved in decision making on party and government issues.

There were many reasons why women were not fully participating in policy decision making. One factor was lack of education. Women were not valued in a society which maintained the myth that a woman was not equal to a man and therefore only men were entitled to education and inheritance. Women got their education from the Qur'an and Bible and not through formal education.

Religion also hindered women's participation in high level decision making. Some religions have been suppressing women to the extent that women regard themselves incapable of expressing their own views. Women were used to listen and accept decisions made by men. Cultural and traditional taboos have also humiliated and prevented the full participation of women in society. Women were seen as slaves to men.

Some women who have emerged in politics in Tanzania to defend TANU (Party) are Bibi Titi Mohammed, Lucy Lameck, Theda Mshau and Agnes Suza. These women have contributed to the attainment of the country's independence.

Although they have played a major role in the history of the country, many of their development proposals particularly on women were rejected. Few women were in top leadership positions to push these proposals.

The Tanganyika Women's Organisation (UWT), the national women's organization, was formed after independence to give women an opportunity to participate in nation building. It sensitized women in Tanzania to feel confident as women and to control their own organization.

Other organizations changed in their attitude towards women. Women took on leadership roles in these groups. They became active in political parties as chairpersons, committee members and secretaries.

In the 1990 General Elections, Kate Kamba and Shamin Khan beat their opponents in the race for constituency seats. In Zanzibar, all the women candidates who contested for the constituency seats won the election.

Of the 33 women who contested for parliamentary seats through the mass organisation only four were successful. Together with 15 special seats reserved for women, 23 out of 216 MPs of the Union Parliament are women.

Source: *Sauti Ya Siti. Tanzania: TAMWA, (11) Oct-Dec 1990. pp.2-3.*

Getting a Foothold in Indian Politics

By Vibhuti Patel

Let us enter Politics, continue our struggle and take leadership.
Can't put up with patriarchal power any more.
O Venubai, O, Rampyar why do you remain repressed?
Come out and join our rally.



Grace de Jesus-Sievert

This is how the song sung for the first time by the "Toiling Women's Liberation Movement" members in the late seventies ended. It represented the gusto of a newly formed mass organisation of tribal women in Dhulia district. It became popular among the women's groups not only in Maharashtra but also all over India. This song represented the new understanding of 'politics'. Politics was not only electoral politics or membership of political parties, but a collective action of women against oppressive political power with a long term goal of social transformation that ensured women's liberation from exploitation, degradation, injustice, subjugation and superstition.

The slogan "Personal is political" popularised by the Western women's liberation movement appealed to many city-based women's groups who realised how individual cases of violence against women were not merely "personal problems" but an outcome of sociocultural, historical, political and economic realities in which Indian women had to survive. As a

result, the issues which affected women and treated as personal problems such as rape, family violence, dowry murders, harassment at the workplace were put on the 'public-political agenda' of the women's movement. The pressure from the new women's groups forced the mainstream political parties also to show greater concern for women's issues at least in their public speeches, press statements and election manifestos. After the nationwide anti rape movement in 1980 cases of violence against women became issues for parties to score points against contenders in electoral battles as well as in the local power struggles.

Mobilisation of women by political parties

The parliamentary parties started viewing women as a constituency in the eighties. This changing attitude of parliamentary parties towards women is reflected in their election manifestos, their attitude towards women candidates and their overall electoral strategies. In the electoral process, two contradictory processes exist. On the one hand, power-



Grace de Jesus-Sievert

ful and articulate women leaders who are mainly from the elite are part of the process and on the other hand there are also women who are mere rubber stamps. However, the elite women's political presence derives from their relations with male politician-husbands, brothers, fathers, and father-in-laws.

Implications of increased political participation of women

Women's visibility in the political scenario can be understood in two ways:

- ★ increase in the number of women in the electoral process and their meaningful contribution in highlighting women-specific issues.
- ★ qualitative change in political goals and processes as a result of accommodating women's perspectives and priorities.

An increasing number of meetings, shibirs, welfare programmes, national conventions has been organised by different political parties of their women cadres. Mahila Congress, BJP Women's Front, Communist Party of India, Republican Party of India, Janta Front and Shetkari Sangathana have all organised conventions to discuss and highlight women's problems.

Hurdles faced by women candidates

Most of the women face tremendous opposition from family, community and the male political leaders if they decide to enter electoral politics or public life. The present political leadership, inspite of its populist rhetorics, want to keep women out of the political scene. Women politicians are still looked upon as appendages to the males in the political arena. Indian women's lower educational level, inferior social status and lack of autonomy are reflected in their lower participation in politics. Increasing criminalisation, corruption



Grace de Jesus-Sievert

and compromises required to sustain one's political career deter women from entering mainstream politics. Even among the majority of women's rights groups, politics is equated with politicking, dirty manoeuvring and manipulations and therefore power and politics remain an anathema to them. But at the same time, women activists involved in direct action for the past one and a half decade have also realised the limitations of micro-level activities.

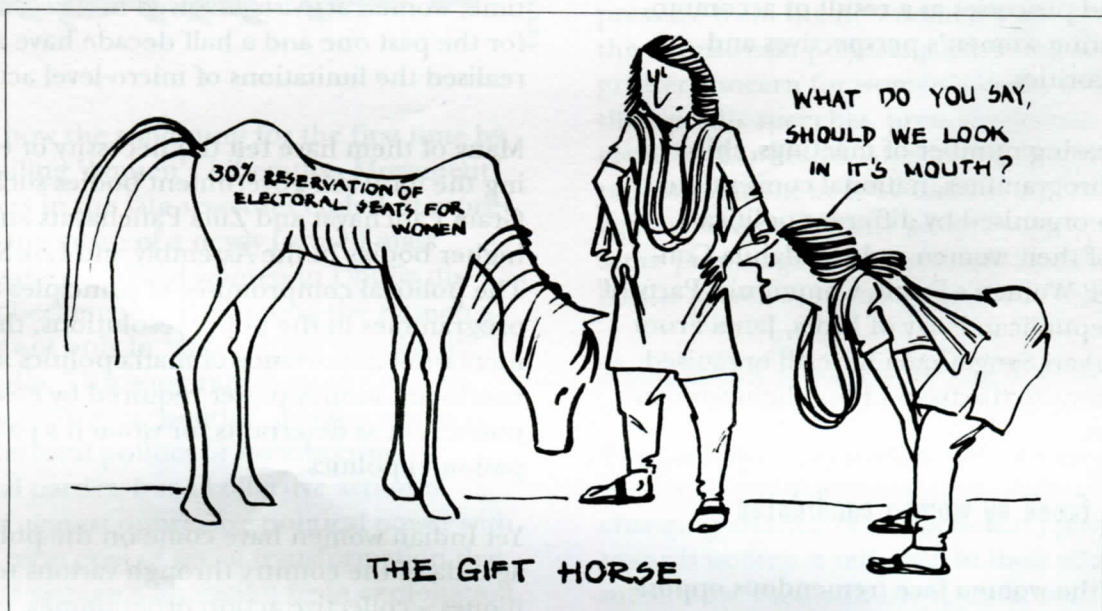
Many of them have felt the necessity of entering the local self-government bodies such as Gram Panchayat and Zilla Panchayats and higher bodies in the Assembly and Lok Sabha. The political compromises of principles and programmes in the policy resolutions, the increasing importance of mafia politics and exorbitant money power required by electoral politics act as deterrants for women's participation in politics.

Yet Indian women have come on the political agenda of the country through various techniques – collective action programmes, consciousness raising, petitioning and lobbying. In addition they have produced well-researched documents and obtained after great effort, some media visibility for women's issues. This contradictory process must be kept in mind to evolve a proper understanding of women's political participation in India.

Source: *Womenspeak*

Interview with an Indian Activist

Gangaben Solanki is a 34 year old *dalit* Gujarati woman who has been working in her basti for the last ten years helping women informally. She is employed in a municipal school and works at home looking after her two children and husband. She has often locked horns with the local dalit's party leaders and caste leaders in putting forward the women's question. Her natural dynamism and deep concern for women makes her an instinctual feminist and activist. When 30 percent reservation of seats for women was announced, she formulated her viewpoint based on her own experiences and thoughts.



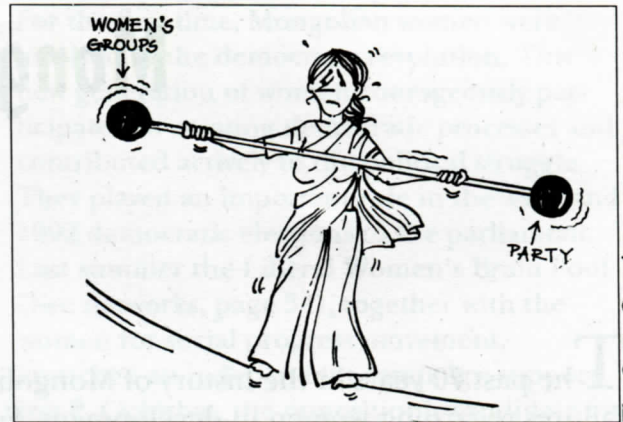
"When I first heard of 30 percent, I felt quite happy about it. Women, social workers like me who work in a community and all of us in the women's groups, need official support for everyday living. It is not only taking out marches and campaigns. Some women have problems when they are out hawking with the

municipality or with the police. They can also be given stall space through the corporation. In my case I was allocated a house but the files just lay there for three years. So many women who become widows have to go to corporators pay bribes or do sexual favours to get their room in their name.

If women are elected then women can go to them, without feeling afraid, and ask for help. For example, they may need certificates or other official papers. Men have been corporators for years they have contacts with builders and have perfected the art of fooling people. It is common for them to give slum dwellers taps or latrines by asking them to waive their rights over the land. Or they take commission from builders. Wherever there are old buildings they tell the tenants that they will repair them but in reality they take money from the corporation. Women candidates can expose such goings on. See, no one is concerned about women, why look the gift horse in the mouth? So I thought if this government for whatever reason is giving something to women we should just take it."

"Around that time, my caste panchayat had its elections. Do you know that still women have no right to vote. We have the right to vote for the corporation, for the Assembly and Lok Sabha but not for the panchayat! It is such a problem for women coming before a panchayat. Suppose there is a dispute, divorce or battering, these are all problems to be solved by the panchayat. But what happens, the woman feels hesitant coming before a group of men, her own inlaws are there so she cannot speak freely and her family is not aware of what she really wants. Again women have to go to the panchayat for all sorts of certificates like domicile or asking them to pressurise a husband who is refusing to pay maintenance. People were quite impressed and the leaders offered me a seat. They said you should stand and very soon party leaders also heard of this and came to offer me a ticket. They said you will not have to do anything, just stand and we will take care of everything for you. One of them even offered me money for all the election work. If I stand, not only will I have to resign from my job but do what they say. As a woman I will never have the same status as men corporators. And then who will take care of the women of my caste here?"

"So I thought nothing doing I am not going to be sucked into this sort of thing! Being elected



to the corporation will be more of a symbolic thing. Male leaders will continue to rule over the community. If I stay where I am I could do much more for women and see that they get a better deal from the panchayat. By pushing me out of the community the male leaders will continue doing exactly what they have been doing so far, solve problems according to their beliefs or money power. Suppose I was elected, what would be my position in the corporation? I will not be allowed to do anything I want. I will have to get involved in party politics. Do you know that there has been no woman mayor or sheriff in Bombay in the last 40 years?"

"All sorts of other thoughts also came up. Elections will make women oppose each other. If there is another woman like me in my basti then another party will promote her, so both of us who might have cooperated earlier in helping women will now stand against each other. Then who knows women can also become corrupted like the male corporators. Practically I don't know how I would be able to manage. As elected members women could do much good...If you ask me straight off yes or no should there be reservations? Then I think that reservations for women should be there but I am doubtful about it."

Source: *The Quota Question, Women and Electoral Seats* by Nandita Shah and Nandita Gandhi. Akshara Publication, 1992. pp. 19-20.

Mongolian Women Tackle Political Issues

By Oidov Enkthuya

The past 70 years in the history of Mongolia have seen many accomplishments as well as failures regarding women in development. Following the 1921 Revolution, political equality between men and women was proclaimed and legally consolidated. Efforts were made to involve women in political decision-making.

Of those elected in 1931 to local public bodies, women accounted for 30 percent. Six headed the Aimag (provincial) administration. Sixteen women worked as ministers, deputy ministers and heads of government agencies. About 40 women led cooperatives and many of them worked as section chiefs at industrial enterprises as well as chairpersons of state farms. In 1949, 14 women were elected to the State Baga Hural, the country's legislature.

In the legal field, laws promulgated since 1921 have proclaimed equality between men and women in all spheres of life but in spite of these legal provisions, women still experience discrimination. During the totalitarian regime, laws only had a symbolic meaning because all powers were concentrated in the communist party. The country's legislative, executive and judiciary bodies served only as accessories. Although violation of laws was commonplace, women did not protest through the judiciary. The party, not the law, ran the country.

Unequal status of women most clearly appears in the implementation of women's right to vote and run for election. Legislative body members were appointed by the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) while people's participation in elections was a mere formality. Women had no influence at all in legislative decision making. The attempt to expand women's representation at the govern-

ment level by officially imposed quotas and administrative methods turned out, in fact, to be nothing but an artificially invoked campaign.

Has Mongolia succeeded in the past half century to maintain and increase the level of participation of women in decision-making that it had achieved back in 1931? Why then are there only three women out of 76 members of the parliament and none in the recent government cabinet? How many women really participate in the decision-making process of Mongolia at this time? There is prevailing ignorance and lack of awareness of women's issues today.

In 1990, a multi-party political system was established for the first time in Mongolia, and free and fair elections to the parliament were held. In 1992, a new constitution was promulgated. During this difficult transition period from a centrally planned to a market economy, Mongolia is now confronted by post-socialism phenomenon. Now, accomplishments of the past 70 years tend to wear out and the mistakes, accumulated in this period, have aggravated. Women's political conditions are being shaped in an entirely new environment and yet their participation in decision-making is still decreasing. This phenomenon is characteristic not only of Mongolia, but also of other former socialist countries.

Mongolia does not have provisions for national focal points for women's issues and their corresponding implementation mechanisms. This failure is linked to the political repression of the period starting from the mid 1930s to the 1940s. This is one side of the problem. Without a proper understanding of the historical period when the communist party ideology was above the law, correctly defining women's problems today nor working out suitable policies to address these problems, would not even be possible.

Although many problems concerning women accumulated during the communist period, the MPRP waged a wide-ranging propaganda campaign declaring that its policy towards women achieved greater results than ever before, a campaign that continues up to now. The MPRP even blames democratic reforms as the primary cause for failure. The misrepresented statistical data and comparative achievements between the pre-revolutionary period (1921) and the present time artificially distort women's concerns. Women faced problems even before the 1989 democratic revolution.

In 1924, the women's organization was initiated by the MPRP. Like all public organizations in socialist countries, it was financed by the state. All working women were formally taken in as members. In reality, it had no political power and influence. In May 1990, a congress of the Mongolian women's organization was held to reorganize its structure and activities. The reorganization also brought a change in their name to the Mongolian Women's Federation. While the Federation has declared itself non-partisan, it supported the MPRP during the first democratic election of 1990 by mobilizing its staff to work during the election campaigns. This move lost the trust of Mongolian women which paved the way for the creation of other non-governmental and independent organizations and a revitalized feminist movement in the country.

For the first time, Mongolian women were involved in the democratic revolution. This new generation of women courageously participated in creating democratic processes and contributed actively to the political struggle. They played an important role in the 1990 and 1992 democratic elections to the parliament. Last summer the Liberal Women's Brain Pool (See networks, page 34), together with the women for social progress movement, launched an independent campaign supporting P. Ochirbat, the opposition's candidate for president. As a result of these activities, women have gained more exposure to politics. A recent phenomenon in Mongolia is the election of women as leaders of newly formed parties. However, the parties still need to adapt a new approach to women's issues and their participation in decision-making.

The following factors contributed to women's minimal participation in political decision making : 1) A system of social relations and subordination rooted in the male-dominated civilization, reflecting the orthodox male-centric mentality was introduced in Mongolia after the 1921 Revolution. 2) Experience shows that irrespective of the legal recognition of women's equality and the impressive number of educated women-professionals, in conditions where the whole nation lives in poverty, women have no real opportunity to participate in government. 3) A government policy on women's issues is lacking. 4) Only men were consistently educated and trained for leadership. Very few women had opportunities to pursue post graduate training, not because of restrictive policies but tradition. 5) Women themselves have been strongly influenced by male-dominated societies and have little faith in their own capabilities to take on top level leadership.

Hence, if women's issues are to be successfully dealt with in Mongolia, women's organizations should work towards transforming the social and mental attitude toward and of women and raise women's concerns as a political issue.

China's Women Square Up to Political Challenge

By Ya Chen

Xu Yan, mayor of Nantong City in East China's Jiangsu province is among more than 200 women mayors and vice-mayors in China's 500-odd cities.

"China probably has more women mayors than anywhere else in the world," says Zhang Ying, deputy secretary general of the Chinese Mayors' Society and vice mayor of Yulin City in the Guangxi Autonomous Region.

Zhang Ying says China's women mayors are generally younger and have higher education than their male counterparts, showing that voters seem to demand higher qualifications from women candidates. A recent survey showed 86 percent of 91 women mayor respondents to have graduated from college, in contrast to the fact that most illiterates in China are women.

This is because the feudal idea that men are superior to women is still dominant, says vice mayor Li Huifen of Tianjin municipality. Another factor may be the call by the national leadership in 1978 for the promotion of younger and better educated leaders. Most of the incumbent women mayors began their political careers after 1978.



Grace de Jesus-Sievert

One such official is Li Chuanfang. A graduate of the Chongqing Construction Engineering Institute in Southwest China, she is vice mayor in charge of urban construction in Shenzhen, China's first Special Economic Zone.

In her nine years in office, Li has turned Shenzhen from a small, bare town to a city of rising tower blocks and extravagant shopping centres that rival those of neighboring Hong Kong.

"China women, having been socially inferior to men for thousands of years – and this persists today – are better able to square up to adversity," says Li Yanhua, vice mayor of Dezhou City, Shandong province. Of the ups and downs of her 20 years in politics, she says, "I believe success will not come without upsets and tenacity."

Other troubles await women in political office. Not being given credit for one's achievements is what angers Wu Yi, now vice minister of the Foreign Economic Relations and Trade Ministry.

When she was elected vice mayor of Beijing in 1988, she was promptly rumoured to have married a high-ranking official, meaning it was the man's influence which led to her success. She was party secretary of the Beijing Yanshan Petrochemical corporation, China's largest petrochemical complex, before she ran for office.

"Why do they think a woman has to have some support from a man to be politically successful?" asks the vice minister who remains single.

If family burdens remain heavy for the employed woman, it is doubly so for a woman mayor who must not only be a competent

public administrator but also "a good wife and mother," points out Yang Qian, vice mayor of Langfang City in Hebei province. Yang Qian takes care of a crippled mother and her husband, an engineer who is not in good health.

Few can really be ideal in both roles, she says. "We just try our best."

So does Ruan Xueqing, vice mayor of Wuyishan City, Fujian province. She uses every "free" time to be with her husband and children, and does most of the household chores even when very tired. For her, a woman is not really successful "if she does not have a happy family."

Vice mayor Yan Aiying of Changzhi City, Shanxi province thinks women are hindered in their career climb by the personality trait of being "easily satisfied with the status quo." A survey of Shanxi's young and middle-aged women cadres shows that only 20 percent want to be promoted to

a higher position. Modesty is another handicap. "They do a lot of work, but say little," says Huang Qizao, deputy chairwoman of the All-China Women's Federation.

She also stresses that the number of women mayors is small compared with that of the men, which is about 3,000. Moreover, the responsibilities given them are "less challenging," such as culture, education and planning.

"So while women are encouraged to fight for themselves, the Beijing Women's Federation at all levels should give them a push and help them achieve higher goals" says Huang Qizao.

Source: *Depthnews Asia*.

Feudal values continue to block women's greater political participation in China.

Cuban Women and Politics

by Isel Rivero y Mendez

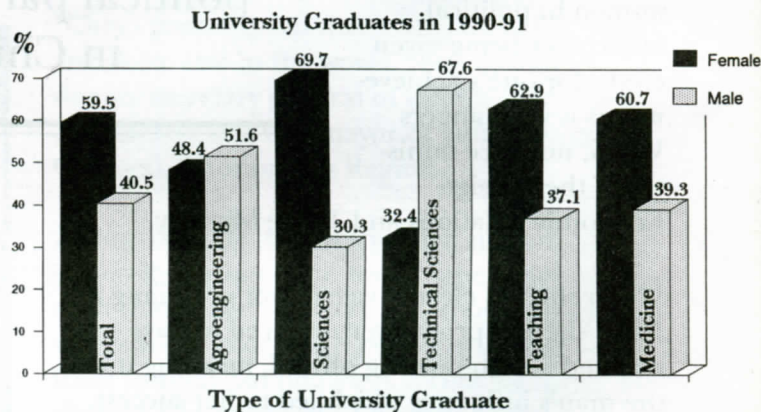
Today, 33 years after the revolution, Cuba is poised before a future ominously reminiscent of the past. And the women? As early as 1869 Ana Betancourt had pleaded with the "founding fathers" to provide for women's rights, since women, both black and white, had participated in a war of independence. But the new era, vis-a-vis women, was little different from the old. Women had to wait until 1917 to win the rights of divorce, to child custody, and to administer their property. The First National Congress of Women was held in Havana in 1932; as a consequence of pressures formulated by this Congress, women won the vote in 1935.

The bibliography on Cuban women is very limited. Yet women made every Cuban revolution, including the current one, possible. It is women's labor that has sustained the revolution to date.

The Federation of Cuban Women was created in 1960. Vilma Espin, a former commando, was its founder and president. As wife of Raul Castro (Fidel's brother) she also was the sole woman (alternate) member of the Politburo. The federation mobilized women for every major campaign declared by Castro: the literacy campaign, the primary health care and voluntary work brigades, and the mobilization of surveillance committees for the "defense of the revolution." In exchange, the government abolished prostitution and reintegrated prostitutes into the formal labor sector. The Family Code, which attempted to legislate labor relations at home, was part of the federation's work, the result of its having claimed that revolutionary men were no different from counter-revolutionaries: at home every man was a bourgeois. The government also legalized abortion, made provisions for prenatal care, and changed the penal code so that rape was punishable by the death penalty. Still, 33 years later, Vilma Espin (now replaced in the Politburo) concedes, "In many households, even today, girls receive an education geared toward assuming greater responsibilities in household duties; boys are educated to face the world." No wonder that in certain Havana circles the *companeras* are claiming

that the real revolutionary thesis is "Machismo-Leninismo."

Indeed, women are merely 21.5 percent of the Communist party membership. A full 53 percent of "economically active" women are now unemployed, including those who are highly educated.



During the last three years, the Foundation for Cuban Women has been created in New Jersey by a group of committed Cuban feminists. With a membership that stretches from academia to the service sectors, this group seeks to establish a feminist agenda outside the boundaries both of the conventional parties in exile and the Federation of Cuban Women.

Source: Excerpt from article in *Ms. Magazine*, "Cuban Women: Back to the Future?" May/June 1993 pp. 15-17.

About the author: Isel Rivero y Mendez is a Cuban writer and poet living in New York City.

Women in Political Power in East and Central Europe

By Mira Janova and Mariette Sineau

East and Central European countries provoked interest and hope among Western feminists between 1945 and the 1960s for many reasons. In concrete terms, these countries were credited with four qualities: they guaranteed women's professional and educational advancement; they developed social policy which freed women from childcare, setting up collective childcare facilities; they introduced liberal, egalitarian legislation on women's rights, concerned as much with private life (contraception, abortion, divorce, women's rights within marriage) as with public life; they favour large-scale female participation in the different structures of political life.

If the policies concerning women in postwar communist regimes, and the consequences of these policies are examined objectively, two appreciatively different periods can be distinguished.

The first (1945 until 1960-65) is the period during which the socialist myth of women's liberation was constructed: it was one of the priority tasks which would contribute to the construction of a new society. The status of women had to be changed through legislation first of all, but also through a series of measures called socialist education, which was profoundly to transform traditional attitudes.

The theme of women's liberation in socialist society was linked to the essence of Marxist ideology concerning revolutionary change and aiming to abolish all forms of slavery and domination. The emergence of the 'woman question' in propaganda solved in the short term the problem of the shortage of unqualified labour in the first stages of the construction of communism. It was precisely this period which incited Western feminists to praise the achievements of women in the East.

The setting up of an educational and re-educational system together with the massive entry of women into the economy on the one hand and the relentless pace of industrialisation linked to massive population migrations to large and medium sized towns on the other, changed, in the short term, a good many patriarchal attitudes which had dominated in many of the East European countries before the arrival of communism. These changes were even more obvious in less industrialised countries in which the social relations of rural life were the norm (Bulgaria, Romania, USSR).

In the 1960s and 1970s, women in the East were already well integrated into the labour market and represented nearly half of the working population. However, and in spite of their equal educational attainments, women suffered from a clear wage differential and had only marginal access to managerial positions (Tryfan, 1990; Siemienska, 1990; Wolchik, 1979, 1981).

During this period, an increasing number of women were elected to parliaments. At the

end of the 1960s, the female presence in different parliaments varied from 13.5 percent in Poland to over 30 percent in East Germany and the Soviet Union.

The participation of women in political power during this phase of the construction of socialism took on a symbolic quality. In the late 1960s, women represented on average over 21 percent of the members of the East and Central European Communist parties and only 8 percent of their Central Committees. During the same period, the percentage of women members of the political bureaux of Communist parties never exceeded 5 percent.

Behind the socialist myth of women on the road to political equality with men, there is a more sombre reality. In the East as in the West, women bore the burden of the double division of power-vertical and horizontal between the sexes. They remained marginal, on the edge of political life, represented only at the bottom of the power hierarchy or in sectors considered to be unimportant, where real power was not at stake.

In the second period, changes in political life were less visible. As in the first period, there was a large and growing number of women representatives in the different parliaments. From 1970 to 1980, the number increased by more than 10 percent in Hungary, Romania, and Poland. Yet in real seats of power, at the top of the Communist party and in government, women remained in a tiny minority.



Grace de Jesus-Sievert

The most recent elections in Central and Eastern Europe, following the fall of the Communist regimes reveal a spectacular loss of women representatives in the new parliaments. This drop is the most marked in Romania where the percentage has fallen from 34.4 percent in 1985 to 5.5 percent in 1990.

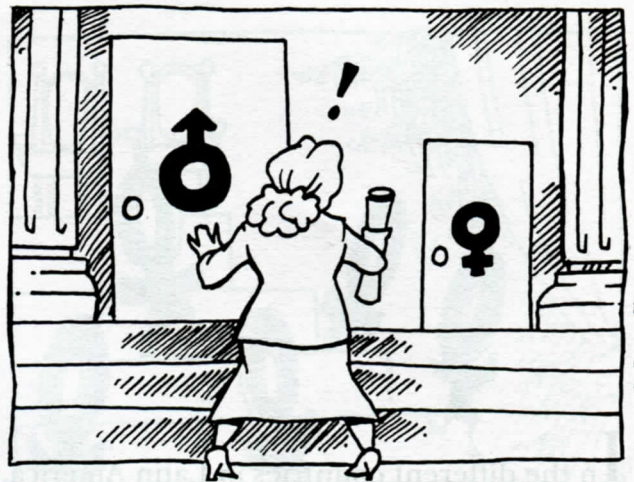
With this kind of regression, the Communist countries have lost their vanguard position in relation to Western Europe. How can this regression be explained? Is it a phenomenon that is affecting the whole of the political sphere? Why are women being eliminated from the world of politics? Are the revolutions which swept away the Communist regimes bringing in new models for women's social roles? By rejecting Communism and its different propaganda themes, are women in Eastern and Central Europe going to return to old pre-communist values, or are they going to seek references in the Western model, now that they know the true situation of women in the West?

While the situation of women in ex-communist countries today raises more questions than it gives answers, several comments may be made. First, the significant drop of the number of women representatives in the different newly elected assemblies seem to be a direct consequence of the political changes and of the new importance in elections.

For the first time in 45 years, elections are no longer a matter of masquerade and imitation, but represent a serious question of power; they consequently mean real competition between the candidates chosen by the different parties. Artificially raised under Communist regimes, the percentage of women representatives can seem, in fact, to be exceptionally low today.

However, the changes in the East do not mean that there is no hope for the growth of feminism in these countries. There may be fewer women in politics - a consequence of the electoral market - but women may have a greater influence. Indeed, the intellectuals who fought hardest for political change are

the very same ones who are most in favour of the rapid integration of women in politics. Furthermore, in creating opposition movements, intellectuals largely depended on the presence of well-known women leaders and activists (Siemienska, 1990). In Bulgaria, women intellectuals, writers, painters, economists, lawyers, appeared at the head of all the opposition movements and formed the hard core of the opposition's electoral campaign in 1990. The Socialist Party placed competent women in prominent positions to help boost party fortunes and give it a more positive image.



Grace de Jesus-Sievert

Women may have lost numerical importance in parliament, but they have gained positions of power in government and elsewhere. In Bulgaria, Emilia Maslarova is in 1991 Minister of Labour and social affairs. In Poland, women hold two of the three vice-presidential posts of the Polish parliament. In Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel's government appointed three women to important posts in 1990; Olga Klimova as Ambassador to the United States, Dagmar Buresova as Minister of Justice for Czech regions, and Vera Caslavstra as advisor on social affairs. Finally, in the new united Germany, Chancellor Kohl's government of 20 ministers includes four women or 20 percent, a rate equivalent to that of the new Bundestag elected in December 1990 and a result which may at least partly be attributed to the fusion with the former GDR, which had always had a high number of women in its political elite.

At the present time, the new political parties emerging in the post-Communist era are concentrating on the problems of economic crisis and on the restoration of national sovereignty. Women's issues and sexual equality have hardly been at the centre of political preoccupations. However, recent events have meant that this kind of problem can no longer be considered minor. The questioning of abortion rights in Poland has shown that this issue is at the heart of violent ideological clashes, confirming the power of the Catholic Church.

Other issues (maternity rights, creches) have proved that they were merely the tip of a major political problem: the passage of a socialist economy - which functioned in a possibly haphazard way but which nonetheless gave certain social advantages to workers. Women in the East may well rediscover in 1991 that the personal is at the heart of the political.

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Source: *Women's Participation in Political Power in Europe, An Essay in East-West Comparison, Women's Studies Int. Forum, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp.115-128, Pergamon Press, USA. 1992.*

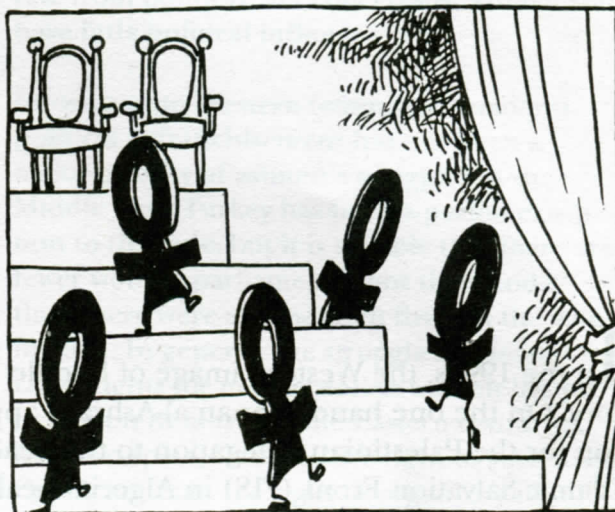
The Mexican women have appealed to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) that was ratified by Mexico. They insist that the interests of women center on equality with due recognition of cultural, economic, political and social diversities.

In Paraguay, the fourth edition of a Women's Forum, was called by the Coordination for Women in Paraguay, with the participation of peasants, militant political parties, labor workers, professionals and representatives from public and non-governmental organizations.

Included among the proposed tasks are consciousness raising training for women who hold managerial positions but lack a gender perspective, and the revision of the electoral system to facilitate greater participation of women in public roles. The organized Paraguayan women offered their support to Mavi Brusquetti, candidate for vice president of the Republic under the political movement "Encuentro Nacional," marking a historical milestone in Paraguay's politics. According to her, women can provide another perspective to politics and certainly women's participation opened discussions and debates to themes that might not be addressed otherwise. Unfortunately, the political party Colorado won, amidst grave accusations of fraud.

The work realized by the Paraguayan women during the last years of Stroessner's dictatorship and in the first years of the transition has had a tremendous impact in the legislative formulation of reforms and in terms of global political measures that it is probable that their successes will be quite significant in years to come.

In Argentina, recent events have provoked surprise and at the same time reflection and polemical discussions. President Menem decreed the formation of a cabinet comprising of eight women as part of a series of political measures by the Peron government which



began with the formation of the National Council of Women. Along with this measure is the signing of the law which requires political parties to carry 30 percent of women candidates in their electoral lists in areas where there are possibilities of their being elected.

In Bolivia, the women are celebrating the inauguration of the State's Women's Program. They feel that this has opened a venue for lively debates between women's organizations and government representatives. The reality of dictatorships such as Bolivia is that while women's organizations flourished, they had very limited participation at both government and State levels.

To achieve greater political participation for women, it is necessary to present more daring proposals and changes in social and political systems, not only in terms of choosing representatives but also in being able to freely express our sentiments in both private and public sectors. The latest initiatives and experiences in Latin America are very optimistic.

Source: "America Latina, Una Nueva Manera de Hacer Politica," *Mujeres en Accion*, 2/93, pp. 27-30. *Isis Internacional*, Santiago de Chile. Condensed version in English by Luz Martinez and Lourdes Alvarado.

Women and Politics in the Middle East

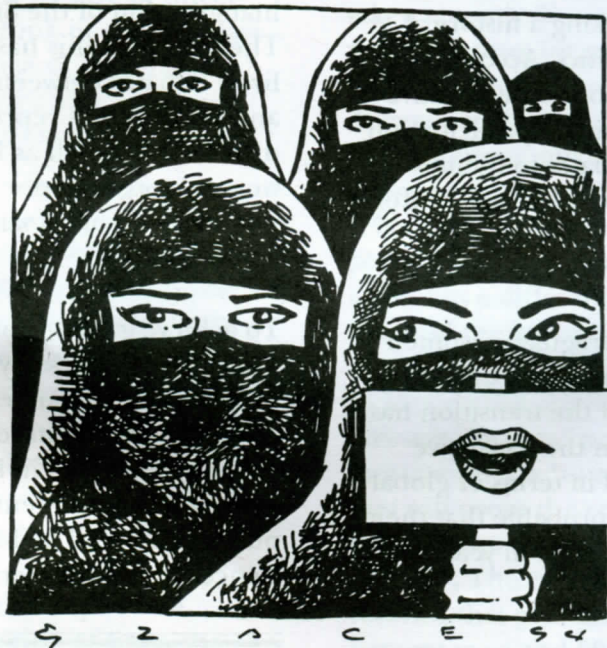
By Sarah Graham-Brown

In the 1990s, the Western image of Middle Eastern women's role in politics is contradictory. On the one hand, Hanan al-Ashrawi appears as the sophisticated, articulate spokesperson for the Palestinian delegation to the peace talks; on the other, male politicians of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria speak of women as subordinates who should not be allowed to work outside the home, let alone participate in politics.

This contradictory image reflects broad conflicts and debates in the Middle East over the nature of society and the status of women. These conflicts arise in part from the cumulative impact of a century of intense economic change and social dislocation, generating crises that have become particularly acute over the last decade. Women have been active political players throughout this process. They have not always won their battles, but there is no doubt that they have fought them.

As early as 1911, Egyptian writer Malek Hifni Nasif stood up in an all-male nationalist congress and demanded that women have the right to be educated to whatever level they desire. Eighty years later, women have much greater access to education, and opportunities to work; in many countries they have the vote, and some positive changes have been made in the laws governing family and personal status. Yet there has been no simple, linear "progress."

Economic changes have altered expectations and patterns of family life, but not always to women's advantage. The extent and impact of economic, social and legal changes varies greatly according to social class, geographical location and ethnic or national group. Today, struggles continue unabated over who should control women's lives, in the family and in the nation.



From the first, the development of women's movements was intertwined with broader movements for political change and national independence. In Iran and Turkey, women's organizations developed rapidly after the collapse of autocratic regimes in 1906 and 1908 respectively. In the period of comparative openness which followed, women

participated in political demonstrations and wrote in the press. Issues surrounding women's status, particularly education, were hotly debated, and women contributed to these debates.

A major limitation of both the independent Egyptian feminist movement and the co-opted movements of Iran and Turkey was that their work influenced only limited sections of society. The majority of women, who were poor and lived outside major cities, were scarcely touched by changes in legal status, or by new educational and employment opportunities.

For the states which emerged from colonial rule in the Middle East, the "woman question" has great symbolic importance. Women are used as symbols of "modernization," or to promote "national culture," or to stress the preservation of "traditional values." Generally speaking, however, women's movements independent of the state have been allowed little or no space to develop.

State strategies regarding women differ considerably. Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran exemplify the theocratic imposition of strict public controls over women's appearance and behavior, enforced by agents of the state.

In Lebanon, with its weak state and fragmented society, controls over women are largely enforced by community pressures. The very limited changes in personal status law in the Arab world have presented little challenge to male hegemony. Only in Tunisia and the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen were changes made to favor women.

Most "secular nationalist" states – for example, Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Algeria – initiated changes affecting women's opportunities for education, health care and improved access to employment. In these states women's organizations have usually been closely linked with or part of the ruling political party structures. Their main role has been to mobilize women around the goals and tasks set by the party and the state.

Today there are more individual women's voices to be heard in the political and artistic arenas (art in the Middle East is seldom sepa-

rate from politics). Yet collectively, women still have little political influence.

In contrast to Western feminist movements, political enfranchisement has not been a major priority of women's struggles in the Middle East. Turkey has been a partial exception to this rule, but it is notable that there are fewer women parliamentarians there today than there were after women first got the vote in 1934. In general, the struggle for democratic rights for men as well as women has yet to be won in most Middle Eastern countries. In this respect, access to the right to vote is less significant than the right to organize without state direction and heavy censorship of unwelcome opinions.

In the Gulf states, women do not have the vote. Women were not able to vote in Kuwaiti elections in late 1992, despite renewed demands from some Kuwaiti women, and the role which women played in the resistance to the Iraqi occupation.

The increasing importance of Islamist politics has not always prevented women from exercising the vote. Some Islamist groups have recognized the potential of women's votes to boost their own support. For example, women have not been deprived of the vote in Iran under the Islamic Republic despite the regime's highly misogynist attitudes which have pushed women out of public life and limited employment in mixed work places.

Where nationalist struggles have been intense, violent and prolonged – for example, in Algeria and in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict – the outcomes of women's participation in political life have been more complex. Some women have risked their lives, and many have been imprisoned and tortured. Although women suffering from these ordeals have sometimes been praised as heroic, fears and suspicions about their sexual vulnerability have often created painful problems in returning to ordinary life.

The Palestinian uprising (*intifada*) in the occupied territories, which began in December 1987, has mobilized more women than ever before, young and old, in refugee camps, towns and even isolated villages. Heightened violence by Israeli occupation forces has not spared women. While to some observers this situation has brought real changes in attitudes toward women's political activism, others argue that this has been at the expense of attention to women's own demands. As one of the leaders of the women's movement, Amal Hreish, put it, the changes for women have been "superficial, not profound."

The state and political movements have not been the only factors influencing women's status. During the past century, most countries in the region have suffered major wars, political repression, and dispossession of national or ethnic groups. The patriarchal organization of family and society has altered to cope with rapidly changing conditions.

In the Middle East, as in other developing regions and with the possible exception of the Persian Gulf states, the size of households has shrunk: no longer do several generations live under the same roof. This thinning out of the extended family has affected some of the mechanisms of male authority over women.

There has been a growing awareness among activist women in the Middle East that even where women enjoy greater legal rights (for example, in Turkey or Tunisia) or improved rights to education and employment (as in Egypt, Syria and Iraq), male control of women's personal lives and sexual behavior is little changed. This is highly controversial terrain.

Women who challenge patriarchal norms of virginity at marriage, male sexual freedom

compared with control of women's sexuality, and, in some regions, genital mutilation, risk accusations of betraying their culture, their religion and even their own sex. In the view of many, to challenge these norms is to accept Western norms of sexual and personal behavior. This is despite the fact that many women who are critical of their own culture are also critical of the West and its attitudes toward the Middle East.

While some of the ideas advanced on the politics of personal life may have been "seeded" from the West, their expression is shaped by the region's specific political and

Women who challenge
patriarchal norms...
risk accusations of
betraying their culture,
their religion and even
their own sex.

social context. Most women who regard themselves as feminists or campaigners for women's rights are acutely aware that they may be regarded as promoting ideas associated with cultures which have challenged and tried to subvert their own.

A prominent trend in the 1980s was the revival or creation of Islamist movements in most countries of the region. These have gained numerous women adherents, including many college graduates. These groups are far from homogeneous in their political stances, but have fairly similar views on the "woman question." They have played an influential role in setting the tone of the debate in the 1980s, often putting their critics on the defensive. Their strong condemnations, not only of the encroachment of Western values in the Middle East but also of the "corruption" of indigenous moral values has challenged exponents of women's rights in a more secular tradition.

Most Islamist groups stress the importance of male authority and emphasize the primacy of women's roles as wife and mother. They stress sexual purity and control, and the danger of

losing it, as a justification for increased male supervision of women and for insisting on self-control by women themselves.

Women activists working within Islamist groups clearly have to tread a fine line between political commitment and the pressure to prioritize the roles of wife and mother. The tension is not always resolved.

The issue of women's dress has recently become the most visible symbolic sign of the struggle over women's identity. "Covering up," which has become much more prevalent in urban society during the 1980s, can range from covering hair and throat and wearing modest clothes to full veiling and the wearing of gloves.

The importance ascribed to dress codes also reflects a broader concern over women's social and political roles, and how these are symbolized. Many people in the region—not only Islamists and their sympathizers—regard this as a significant issue.

Some women argue that "modest dress" frees women to move around the streets and the workplace without harassment by men. Opponents argue that it is another form of male control and male definition of women's space. They further argue that it stigmatizes those who do not conform and denies women the freedom to decide on their own appearance: personal morality should not be confused with external conformity to norms of dress. One consequence of this visual divide has been to put considerable pressure on young women to adopt modest dress, and many do so, for a variety of reasons which may have little to do with adherence to an Islamist group or even with personal piety.

While some feminists view Islam, and indeed all the major monotheistic religions, as incompatible with women's emancipation or liberation, the majority of Middle Eastern women activists seek some kind of accommodation with religious belief, because of its critical role

in indigenous culture. Some women have sought in the earliest days of Islam a model of women's role in society which differs from those which have evolved since.

This has been a largely speculative and even polemical exercise, though historical research has helped revise ideas about women's roles in Middle Eastern societies. Stereotypes of the passivity of Middle Eastern women in the face of oppression are embedded in most histories of the region, written by Western and Middle Eastern male historians. Women and their concerns frequently have been omitted entirely from the historical record. Recent efforts to recoup this hidden history of women have challenged these assumptions and revealed a far more complex picture.

Recent historical work has shown that women often played active roles, and on occasion resisted oppression, both by the state and their menfolk. Some studies also suggest a considerable difference between the way women actually behaved and the prescriptive writings on "proper" female behavior which have come down to us from religious scholars and other male writers.

At the present time many Middle Eastern societies are going through particularly intense political and cultural identity crises, generally coupled with severe economic dislocation. In these circumstances, women's symbolic roles tend to take on added significance, and to the detriment of the women themselves.

Women as activists and participants in political and social movements in the Middle East, continue to struggle as they negotiate and renegotiate the way they present themselves at home, in the workplace and in the larger political arenas of neighborhood and nation.

Source: Pamphlet series from Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) on *Women in the Middle East*. MERIP, 1500 Mass Ave. NW Suite 119, Washington, DC 20005, USA.

National Women's Policy: PNG Takes the Plunge

By Eileen Tugum Kolma

Around the Pacific women are working with governments to put promises and dreams into the shape of a national women's policy. In the Cook Islands a first draft has been developed and in Solomon Islands between 60 and 80 women are meeting to finalise their policy. Papua New Guinea's policy was approved in October 1992 and women are committed to making it work for them.

The policy is the single biggest achievement in the history of planning for Papua New Guinea women. It is also believed to be the first in the Pacific.

The policy is based on the country's National Constitution which calls for integral human development and equality and participation by all citizens. Its vision is to "increase participation by women as both beneficiaries and agents in the development process and in improving the quality of life for all".

In his address before launching the policy, the Minister responsible for women, Andrew Posai, said, "The goal of my government is equal participation and contribution by the women and men. Our means to achieve this must be partnership". He continued, "Women will not resolve their problems alone.

That means partnership between all levels of government, partnership between NGOs, partnership with families, businesses, churches, the police force. That partnership is necessary for progress." Mr. Posai urged all Papua New Guinea men and women to "fight for general equality with vigour, for the betterment of PNG".

Responding to the launch, the National Council of Women challenged the government to "put its money where its mouth was." Council President Maria Kopkop said, "The Women's Policy is a challenge for the government to

perform according to its promises, that is, to formulate a Budget that clearly and honestly recognises the vital input and productivity of 50 percent of the nation's population."

The policy has not come easy. Those involved in selling it to the public and the government met a lot of opposition. Many men opposed it on the grounds that it might elevate women above men. They had to be convinced that far from lifting women above men, the policy only seeks to create awareness and achieve recognition of women's contribution to nation-building, and to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women.

The National Council of Women has vowed to use the policy at every opportunity to remind the government of its commitment to ensure that women participate and benefit from developments taking place in the country. Copies of the PNG Women's Policy may be obtained from:

Women's Division, Dept. of Home Affairs and Youth
P.O. Box 7345
Boroko NCD
Papua New Guinea.

Source: *Women's News*, Vol. 8, Nos. 1 & 2, May 1993.

Interview with Sandra Pierantozzi: Nipped at the Polls in Palau

By Bernie Pereira

Sandra Pierantozzi was the first woman to ever run for the number two job during the November 1992 national elections. She missed out by a narrow margin and in this interview, reflects on her pioneering political gamble.

Why did you run?

SP: I ran for the office of Vice-president because I thought that women should have active participation in policy-making. It was a very enriching experience which forced me to see how people live and what their basic needs are. Because I am a woman I was able to do door-to-door campaigning. Palauan men don't go out campaigning. They sit at home and send their wives to do it.

As a woman did you get a lot of support from other women?

SP: Unfortunately no. A big problem was jealousy. Somebody gave me a label for it - "professional jealousy", which came mainly from my peer group. I am a member of a women's club and one day my friend asked me why my women's club was not supporting me. To my face they had said they were supporting me but it turned out that they weren't at all. I really have no answer as to why or how to change this sort of thing except that I believe that the more we attend women's conferences, the more we understand the issues, the more we learn that as women we need to stand together to push each other up, not to pull each other down.

If your peers were not comfortable with a woman, then who was?

SP: In general I found that the older generation were happy to accept the idea of a woman in the job. Also, I had proven to them that I could do the job. In 1991 I became the first minister to balance Palau's budget and submit the presidential budget to the Senate on time. This good track record really helped.

Do you feel defeated?

SP: I don't consider it a defeat but a major milestone in the history of Pacific women. I am a trail-blazer for women and that is what the younger generation was so excited about, that if I could do it so could they.

Did the issue of you being a woman get raised a lot in the campaign?

SP: Unfortunately yes. In one of my campaign rounds, one of the questions asked was that if I was elected as Vice-president and something happened to the President, could I, as woman, handle it? I reminded them that in Palauan culture it is the women who bestow titles on the chiefs. If a chief doesn't behave, the woman can take his title away. So what's so odd about a woman as an elected leader? We just have to look back to our culture to see that the answers are there.

In the end it wasn't being a woman that lost the campaign for me. The real problem was that I announced my candidacy very late so I didn't have time to campaign. I won't make that mistake again. This time I ran on the campaign slogan "Why not?" Next time I'll be more positive and say "Of course."

Source: *Women's News*, Vol. 8, Nos. 1 & 2, May 1993.

Netherlands Association for Women's Interests, Women's Work and Equal Citizenship

The Netherlands Association for Women's Interests started in 1894 as the Association for Women's Suffrage. It is not linked to any political party. Its members form a cross-section of political and non-political women from different social sectors, all involved in placing women's issues on the political agenda. It is affiliated with the International Alliance of Women (IAW). The IAW's aim is Equal Rights - Equal Responsibilities. Equal political participation is one of its most important prerequisites. IAW has an NGO-consultative status with various UN and other official international bodies.

The Action Men/Women 50/50 of the Netherlands Association for Women's Interests started in 1985 and aims at achieving equal representation of women and men - 50/50 - in political functions - by the year 2000! The Action M/W 50/50 wants to realize the democratic principle that representative bodies should reflect the composition of the population.

The Association for Women's Interests uses four strategies:

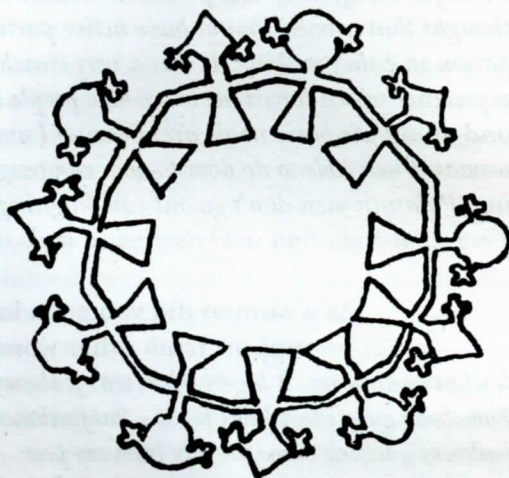
- ★ to broaden public support through consultation and cooperation with women's organizations and national machineries;
- ★ to emphasize the tremendous disadvantage women have in politics compared to men and seek ways to improve the situation;
- ★ to influence the attitudes and behavior by stimulating discussion on positive action and by propagating measures why and how the

number of women in politics can and should be increased; and

- ★ to issue press releases and letters to both print and broadcast media.

For more information contact:

Netherlands Association for Women's Interests, Women's Work and Equal Citizenship
Oudegracht 139bis
3511 AJ Utrecht
The Netherlands
Tel: (+31-30) 367415
Fax: Joke Huisman-Vaal (+31-35) 891305



Liberal Women's Brain Pool in Mongolia

Liberal Women's Brain Pool (LEOS) is a voluntary non-governmental organization uniting the women supporting democratic views and processes. Its aim is to study the possibility of promoting talented professional women to serve the state and government 's economic and political decision-making positions.

It was founded on October 20, 1992 on the basis of a historical tradition admiring Mongolian women's wisdom, knowledge and ability; Mongolia's present social demand and con-

sumption where highly qualified women in different professions are active in political and public life even though the percentage being elected to decision-making positions of the state, government, party, and public organizations is still very low; and world trends promoting women to economic and political decision-making positions and increase their influence and role in the society.

LEOS projects and activities include an information fund related to women problems which was conceptualized to facilitate its overall program. On this regard, a study is being conducted:

- ★ to identify a pool of talented professional women;
- ★ to popularize these women through radio, television and press; and
- ★ to arrange work for indirectly influencing persons in decision-making positions of the state, government, party, and public organizations.

For more information contact:

Budragchaagiin Uranchimeg
 General Council of Mongolian Women's
 Federation
 Ulaanbaatar
 Mongolia
 Tel: 328060

P. Altantsetseg
 Women's Council, Ulaanbaatar City
 Ulaanbaatar
 Mongolia
 Tel: 22913

Jambalorjiin Erdenechimeg
 Khural of Citizen Representatives of the
 Capital City
 Sukhbaatar Square, 11
 Ulaanbaatar
 Mongolia
 Tel: 22007



And now for the bad news...

Dutch Party to Exclude Women

The Dutch right-wing protestant party SGP, have decided to ban women from party membership. This decision was based on their interpretation of the bible that women should not be politically active. The conspicuous vote came from the men, though women have a total two-thirds voting membership.

The motion was met with aversion by most other political parties and the women's movement. Upon the request of the women's groups, the Dutch Prosecution Office will start an investigation on the legitimacy of the SGP decision.

The motion also contradicts the policies of the state as the Dutch government favors the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Source: *Women Envision*, No. 8, December 1993

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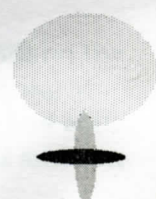
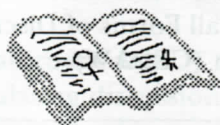
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Women Empowering Communication

Photo Gallery



Teresita Hermano

Opening Dinner



Thai Dancers

Plenary Sessions

PETA Presentation



Closing Plenary



Indian Participants

Closing Program



Pacific Participants



**Field
Trip**

**Working
Group**

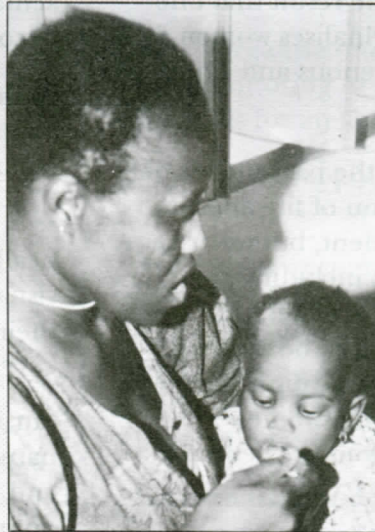


Participants
enjoying a
well-earned
break

Breaktime



Resource Fair



Baby Dineo
enjoying her break



**Post
Conference
Workshop
- Batik
Making**

Over four hundred women communicators from media organizations and networks in more than 80 countries in all continents of the world met in Bangkok, Thailand (12 - 17 February 1994) to discuss issues related to the theme of Women Empowering Communication. The conference was organized by the World Association for Christian Communications (WACC) in London, Isis International in Manila and International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC) in New York.

In a final statement, participants declared:

Our goal is a more just, people-centred and sustainable world order. We are concerned about development trends: globalisation of economies and the media. This is leading to centralisation of control over both resources and decision-making, with the result that one culture dominates and marginalises women, nature, minorities and indigenous and Third World peoples.

Women are concerned with the basic needs of our societies, with the creation of life and the preservation of the environment, but we are at the bottom of all hierarchies including religious bodies. If our interests are met, the interests of all humanity will also be satisfied. As women working in communication, we see our role as one of ensuring that women's interests, aspirations and visions are centrally located and disseminated.

The so-called 'mainstream' media are a male-dominated tool used by those in power. At the global level they are controlled by the North; nationally they are in the hands of the local elite. As they are now structured, the media propagate unsustainable lifestyles, militarism, growing pauperisation and consumption patterns which turn people into consumers not only of goods but of ideas and ideologies: women, children and the majority of men are invisible and their voices are unheard. There is particular lack of respect for the integrity and dignity of women: stereotyped and dehumanised, we have been turned into commodities. The excessive use of violence in these media is destroying the sensibilities of all humanity.

For all these reasons it is essential to promote forms of communication that not only challenge the patriarchal nature of media but strive to decentralise and democratise them: to create media that encourage dialogue and debate; media that advance women and peoples' creativity; media that reaffirm women's wisdom and knowledge, and that make people into subjects rather than objects or targets of communication. Media which are responsive to people's needs.

In the years since the Nairobi World Conference on Women, which closed the United Nations Decade for Women in 1985, our networks and levels of organisation have grown. We have made many interventions and taken many actions at all levels: local, national, regional and international. Yet despite our achievements, negative global trends have become more powerful.

In this context, we examined various strategies aimed at strengthening and empowering our communications. They include:

- ★ Strengthening peoples', and more specifically women's media, including story-telling, visual and performances arts, which build on their knowledge, wisdom and creativity.
- ★ The integration of humane values into our media creations such as harmony with nature, cooperation, nurturing, caring, love and compassion, and our struggles for freedom, to ensure that our alternatives do not become hierarchical, undemocratic and elitist.
- ★ Education and Training methodologies to access existing media for women's organisations and community groups in order that they can effectively communicate their own messages and concerns.
- ★ Increased opportunities for technical training for women in the area of communications.
- ★ The incorporation of gender-sensitivity, local history and cultural diversity in the education and training of professionals in the field of communications.

Declaration

★ The development of national curricula that encourages critical thinking among future generations through formal and non-formal education.

★ The expansion of gender-specific media research and documentation at the local level.

★ Promoting lobbies and campaigns directed at opinion makers and media consumers to raise public awareness on how issues of development affect women.

★ Strengthening monitoring networks with legal backing to guarantee the democratic functioning of media.

★ Strengthening our linkages with potential allies throughout hierarchies (government, politicians, corporations, donors, media managers) to turn strategies into concrete actions.

★ Building links and solidarity between women and gender-sensitive men working in media at all levels and in all conditions.

★ Continuing to build links among women's networks and forge broader links with other people-oriented networks.

★ Pinpointing special networking considerations and strengthening information exchanges: between urban and rural groups and organisations, across language barriers, at varied levels of consciousness and access to technology, in oppressive conditions.

★ Ensuring the widest and most appropriate dissemination of information related to United Nations meetings that concern people's lives and future, including training in methodologies on how to use this information.

★ Women's participation and the inclusion of women's perspectives to be assured in all stages of the preparatory process of these meetings.

We also called on the conference organisers to spearhead the following activities:

★ A worldwide effort to document all forms of women's communication practices, and organise workshops on how they can be used effectively.

★ Explore possibilities for establishing a women's satellite network.

★ Ensure swift global dissemination of women's views at the 1995 World Conference on Women and NGO Forum in Beijing via satellite communications.

★ Organise a video production on women's lives around the world for viewing and dissemination at Beijing.

★ Build support for one day during the Beijing conference when media houses worldwide promote programming by and about women.

★ Organise one day at the start of 1995 for the monitoring of all media and use data as the basis for an analysis of where women are.

★ Build support for 1996 to be declared International Year of Women Communicating.

We further recognise that to achieve our goal of social justice and participatory democracy, we shall have to bring pressure to bear on those who now hold power. And so we identified the following strategies on which to focus these efforts:

Governments and Policy-Makers

To implement the numerous international conventions and agreements relating to women including the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Vienna Declaration on Human Rights, Agenda 21.

Funding Organizations

To re-examine their funding policies giving priority to strengthening women's media and communications networks through support that is relevant, practical and substantial.

Bangkok
17 February, 1994

About Isis International

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Isis International - Manila Coordinators:

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Isis International Associates:

Isis International has a group of Associates, women from different parts of the world who support our aims, give advice and collaborate in our programs.

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Isis International is an international non-governmental women's organization, founded in 1974 to promote the empowerment of women through information sharing, communication and networking. Its network reaches over 50,000 individuals and organizations in 150 countries, from grassroots groups to policy makers. Isis International's activities include resource centers and information sharing, publications and communications, health networking, advocacy of women's issues and skills sharing. It has two offices, one in Santiago, Chile and the other in Manila, Philippines.

Isis International Resource Centers

The Resource Center of each office houses a collection of documentation and information from all over the world on a wide range of development and women's issues. This information is processed by the Resource Center and Information Program of each office and incorporated into bibliographic, human resources and data bases. It is made available to all interested groups, institutions and individuals through information services and specialized publications including resource directories, bibliographic catalogues and publications on specific themes. The Resource Centers are also open to visitors.

Regular Resource Center publications include the bilingual *Base de Datos Mujer - Women's Data Base* and *Documentas*, a bibliographic bulletin in Spanish, from our office in Chile and *Resource Update*, a bibliographic bulletin and Information Packs on key issues, in English from our office in the Philippines.

Isis International Publications

The Communication Networking Program of each office publishes a quarterly magazine: *Mujeres en Accion*, in Spanish, from our office in Chile and *Women in Action*, in English, from our office in the Philippines. These publications bring together information, analyses and perspectives about and from women around the world and serve as communication channels for sharing ideas, experiences and models of organization and action. Books on key issues are published twice a year in Spanish through the Isis Internacional Ediciones de las Mujeres in Chile and on an occasional basis in English through the Isis International Book Series in the Philippines.

The *Women's Health Journal* in English is published by the Health Networking Program of our office in Chile with the collaboration of the office in the Philippines. The office in Chile also publishes the Spanish language *Revista de la Red Salud de las Mujeres Latino Americanas y del Caribe*. *Women Envision*, a monthly newsletter in English is published by the Advocacy and Campaigns Program in our office in the Philippines. It contains information on activities leading up to the World Conference and NGO Forum in China 1995 and other international meetings and campaigns.

Health Networking

The Health Networking Program of our office in Chile coordinates the Latin American and Caribbean Women's Health Network while the office in the Philippines undertakes health networking activities in the Asia-Pacific Region. Both offices offer health information services and resource materials.

Advocacy, Campaigns and Policy

Our office in Chile coordinates the Information and Policy Program on Violence Against Women in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Advocacy and Campaigns Program of the office in the Philippines produces Action Alerts on campaigns, actions and solidarity appeals of women's groups and networks around the world.

Networking Services

Both offices offer referral and assistance to individuals and organizations, locally and internationally in linking with others around the world.

Training

Both offices offer technical assistance and training in communication and information management and in the use of new information technologies.

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"Creative women are not necessarily those who hold political power... (but) ...those who introduce into life other and new dimensions of the human experience and vision. The concept of power underlying the expression 'political power' is a mechanistic one but we no longer live in the realm of simple and harsh mechanical facts. Women, though exercising functions which traditionally belong to the political power sphere can only succeed insofar as they exercise leadership and not power. Political power for women always risks appropriation of its goals by those who have no interest in the issues for which women are fighting. Leadership cannot be wiped out by electoral vote. It means sense of purpose and direction, the capacity to generate energy. It is a permanent commitment to others and to society."

Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo

