



SUMMARY

Women's political participation is a Millennium objective in its own right. Empowering women in the political arena has the potential to change societies. Their involvement in governing bodies at the national and local levels leads to policies and legislation that are focused on women, children and families.

- A growing body of evidence suggests that women in politics have been especially effective advocates for children at all levels, sponsoring legislation and fostering tangible changes in policy outcomes that reflect the rights, priorities, experiences and contributions of women, children and families.
- Though women's parliamentary representation has steadily increased in the past decade, they remain under-represented in almost all national legislatures – accounting for just under 17 per cent of parliamentarians worldwide. Many of the pernicious effects of gender discrimination,

from lower levels of education to prevailing social attitudes that challenge women's competence as decision makers, as well as women's greater work burden, continue to hinder their participation in politics.

- The participation of women in local politics can have an immediate impact on outcomes for women and children, particularly in the distribution of community resources and in promoting provisions for childcare.
- Women's participation in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction is vital to ensure the safety and protection of children and other vulnerable populations. Yet women's role in most peace processes remains, at best, informal. While governments and other political actors appear content to encourage engagement between women's groups that often cut across conflict lines, women rarely make it to peace table.
- Despite limited participation in national and local politics and in post-conflict reconstruction, women

in politics and government are helping change the political environment. Their influence is not just being felt in stronger legislation for children and women; they are also helping decision-making bodies become more democratic and gender-sensitive.

- Increasing women's participation in politics is vital to promote gender equality, empower women and fulfil children's rights. The remaining formal entry barriers must be dismantled, and women encouraged and supported by political parties to stand for office. Legislative quotas are also gaining increasing recognition as a potentially effective vehicle for bolstering women's representation in local government, and in some countries, at the national level as well. Gender initiatives also need the involvement and support of men, especially male parliamentarians and political leaders. Better data and research are required to fully assess the impact of women legislators on policies related to children.

Equality in politics and government

Children have a powerful stake in political outcomes, but they have little power to shape them. Unable to vote or directly represent their own interests in governing bodies, their ability to influence policy is limited. The advocates who speak on their behalf – if there is anyone at all to do so – can make a vast difference to the fulfilment of children's rights to survival, development and protection.

A growing body of evidence suggests that women in politics have been especially effective advocates for children at the national and local levels. They are equally powerful advocates when represented in peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction. Women's participation in politics can significantly transform the governance of a country by making it more receptive to the concerns of all of its citizens. As this chapter will attest, their involvement in politics also fosters direct and tangible changes in policy outcomes that reflect the priorities, experiences and contributions of women, children and families. When women lack a voice in politics, powerful advocates for children remain unheard.

Women's participation in politics, however, remains limited. Although women's parliamentary representation has steadily increased over the past decade, gender parity in politics at all levels is still a long way off. At current annual rates of growth in the proportion of women members of national parliaments – about 0.5 per cent worldwide – gender parity in national legislatures will not be achieved until 2068.¹

Advocating for women, children and families

For several reasons, assessing the impact of women's participation in politics in general,

and on child-related outcomes in particular, is a complex and challenging task. First, in many countries there are still far too few women in politics, and they have been in public life for too short a time, for their impact to be meaningfully assessed. Second, the behaviour of all parliamentarians is still an emerging area of investigation in political science. Third, there is the challenge of indicators: What is an adequate measure to gauge a legislator's impact? While bill sponsorship, voting patterns and political seniority are all significant, they represent relative rather than absolute measures of influence.

Despite these constraints, those cases where there is both a significant level of female political representation and a sufficient amount of data to assess its impact point to an unequivocal conclusion: Women in politics are making a difference in at least three important arenas – national legislatures, local government and post-conflict reconstruction.

- **National politics.** A better representation of women in parliament can make legislatures more gender- and child-sensitive and can influence legislation and policies that address the rights of both groups.
- **Local politics.** The presence of women leaders in local politics often serves to focus greater attention on issues related to women and children. Evidence from India shows that women's participation in local politics can significantly tilt the distribution of community resources in favour of women and children.²
- **Peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction.** There is an increasing recognition that

the contribution of women is critical both to the long-term success of peace processes and to post-conflict stability.

Women in national politics

Promoting the interests of children and women

Research on the priorities of women parliamentarians comes mostly from industrialized countries, where there has been greater scrutiny of legislative behaviour than in developing countries.³ Case studies examining lawmakers' patterns of bill sponsorship and legislative outcomes across a range of industrialized countries confirm a strong commitment by women legislators to issues related to children, women and families. This commitment translates into both active sponsorship of legislation in these areas and to ensuring that the bills become law. A number of studies have expanded this area of enquiry to developing countries, with similar findings.⁴

It would be a mistake to assume on the basis of these results that every woman legislator actively advocates on behalf of women and children; some certainly do not. What the following studies indicate, however, is that many of the issues of particular relevance and importance to women and children might not reach parliamentary agendas without the strong backing of women legislators.

A pioneering study of women legislators in Latin America found that in the 1993–1994 parliament, women deputies in Argentina were 9.5 per cent more likely to sponsor children and family bills than their male counterparts.⁵ Furthermore, despite representing only 14 per cent of deputies, Argentina's women parliamentarians introduced no fewer than 78 per cent of the bills related to women's rights.⁶

Recent evidence suggests that this pattern of behaviour held true over the subsequent decade. In 1999, women legislators in Argentina played a critical role in ensuring the passage of a law that modified the country's penal code to explicitly define sexual crimes against women and children and toughened the penalties for such egregious acts. Several

years later, in the 2004–2005 parliament, women legislators helped pass the Law on the Integral Protection of the Rights of Children and Adolescents.⁷

Other Latin American countries display similar tendencies. In 1999, women deputies in Costa Rica initiated and helped pass the Law against Sexual Exploitation of Minors, together with reforms of the national penal code that toughened penalties for those convicted of sexual assault against children and the disabled. In 2003, women senators in Colombia helped promote groundbreaking equal opportunity legislation. The laws carry wide-ranging provisions to promote and guarantee the rights of girls and women, remove obstacles to the exercise of their rights, and incorporate gender-equitable policies at all levels of the State.⁸

This pattern of advocacy by women legislators on behalf of women and children is also found in industrialized countries. A recent examination of New Zealand's parliamentary debates on childcare and parental leave over a 25-year period (1975–1999) revealed similar tendencies on the part of women legislators (*see Figure 4.1, page 53*).⁹ In the United Kingdom, a forthcoming analysis of more than 3 million words of text from the plenary debates of the National Assembly of Wales also finds important differences between the willingness of female and male legislators to engage in debate about childcare.¹⁰

Parliamentary advocacy on behalf of children and families can also bridge party and ideological lines. Countries where cross-party alliances of women parliamentarians have successfully advanced the cause of women and children include Egypt, France, the Netherlands, South Africa, Sweden, the Russian Federation and Rwanda.¹¹

In the case of the Russian Federation, an examination of the role of women legislators in the 1995–1999 Duma (parliament) shows that they were able to set aside ideological and party differences to promote legislation benefiting children and families. The proposed measures favoured childcare and child support; benefits to citizens with children;

pregnancy benefits and leave; reduced taxes for families with many children; penalties for domestic violence; and equal rights for men and women with families.¹²

Initiatives to promote children’s rights often accompany efforts to advance the rights of women. One such example occurred in Rwanda, where in 1999 women parliamentarians played a critical role in the passage of a law strengthening women’s rights. The new legislation established women’s right to inherit land for the first time. In the wake of the Rwandan genocide, which destroyed and scattered families, the exclusion of women from land ownership became a critical issue. In addition to being a violation of their rights, not allowing women to own land had a negative impact on such issues as food production and security, the environment, settlement patterns and the livelihood of families and children left behind.

Women legislators in Rwanda also actively advocated for increased spending on health and education, and for special support for children with disabilities. In 2006, the Forum of Women Parliamentarians, a cross-party cau-

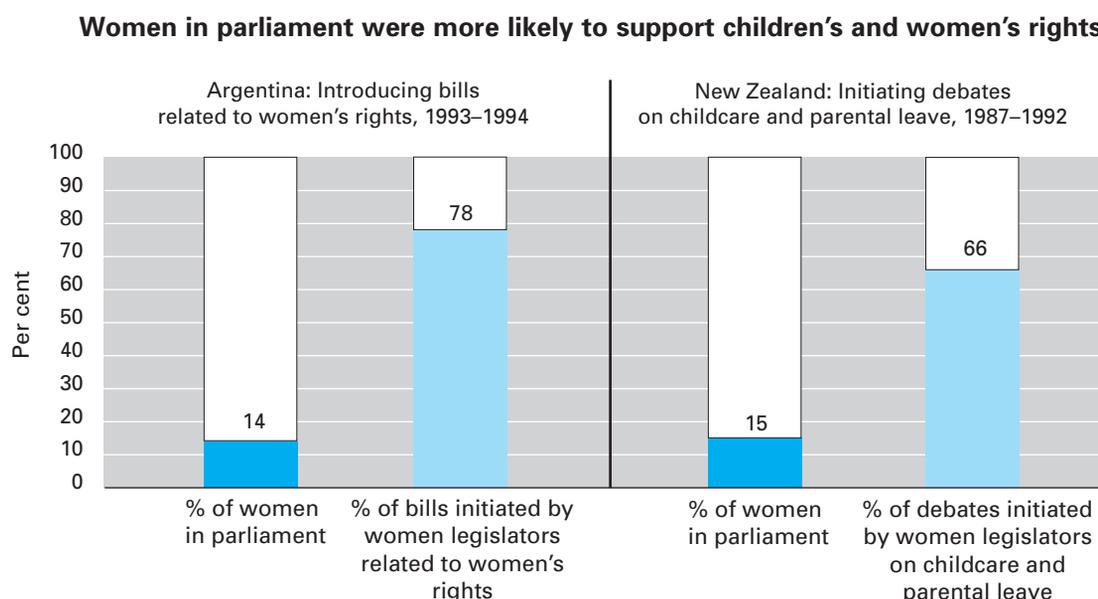
cus formed in 2003, worked on and supported a bill to combat gender-based violence. The proposed legislation will define gender-based violence and address crimes committed during the genocide as well as ongoing violations.¹³

This activism on the part of women legislators in Rwanda is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a trend that has been apparent in other countries in the region for several years. In South Africa, women parliamentarians provided significant support for the 1998 Domestic Violence Act. The act makes specific references to children, defines the different forms of domestic violence and explains how children can get a protection order against their abusers.¹⁴ In neighbouring Namibia, women lawmakers supported groundbreaking legislation dealing with domestic and sexual violence, such as the Combating of Rape Act of 2000, which provides protection against rape to young girls and boys, and the Domestic Violence Act of 2003.¹⁵

Changing the face of politics

Women in parliament are not only having an impact on legislation. Their influence extends beyond their immediate actions and is encour-

Figure 4.1 Bill sponsorship in Argentina and New Zealand



Source: UNICEF calculations for women’s parliamentary representation and patterns of bill sponsorship in Argentina are based on Jones, Mark P., ‘Legislator Gender and Legislator Policy Priorities in the Argentine Chamber of Deputies and the United States House of Representatives’, *Policy Studies Journal*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1997, pages 613-629. UNICEF calculations for women’s parliamentary representation and patterns of bill sponsorship in New Zealand are based on Grey, Sandra, ‘Does Size Matter? Critical mass and New Zealand’s women MPs’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 55, no. 1, January 2002, p. 6. Although the study covered the period 1975-1999, the data were for the period 1987-1992.

Women and politics: Realities and myths

Should one expect the involvement of women parliamentarians to lead to different policy outcomes? The reasons one can assume women might act from a different perspective than their male counterparts are practical rather than theoretical.

An alternative perspective

In an extensive survey of 187 women parliamentarians from 65 countries conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in 1999, the respondents consistently portrayed women as having different priorities from men. Four out of every five respondents believed that women held conceptually different ideas about society and politics. More than 90 per cent agreed that women's greater participation would bring about change, and almost 9 out of every 10 considered that women's participation in the political process significantly changed political outcomes.

Three reasons women politicians are likely to approach politics differently

Women's motivation for entering politics is often different from that of men. In the IPU survey, 40 per cent of the respondents stated that they had entered politics as a result of their interests in social work and 34 per cent through non-governmental organizations, as opposed to the more 'conventional' path of party politics often embraced by men. This finding accurately reflects a well-established tendency among women to engage in civil society as a way of promoting projects that support household survival, and to focus their energies at the local level.

Women are often exposed to different patterns of socialization and

have different life experiences than men and are likely to bring their experience and expertise to bear on their political decisions. While important changes have been taking place over the past few decades, in most countries, women still bear the main caregiving responsibilities for their families, including children and the elderly.

Women are more likely to see themselves as representatives of women.

A study of legislators in the United States, for example, found that women feel a special responsibility to represent other women and consider themselves more capable of representing their interests. In Northern Ireland, for example, almost one third of women who vote thought a woman would better represent their interests.

Why are there still so few women in politics?

Given their potential contribution to the political process, an obvious question arises: Why then are there still so few women participating in politics?

The answer is multifaceted and differs across countries, societies and communities. But several common threads are outlined below.

Women are unlikely to run for political office.

While exact numbers are difficult to come by, existing studies indicate that women are less likely than men to run for office. In the United States, for example, men are at least 50 per cent more likely to have investigated how to place their name on the ballot, or to have discussed running with potential donors, party or community leaders, family members or friends.

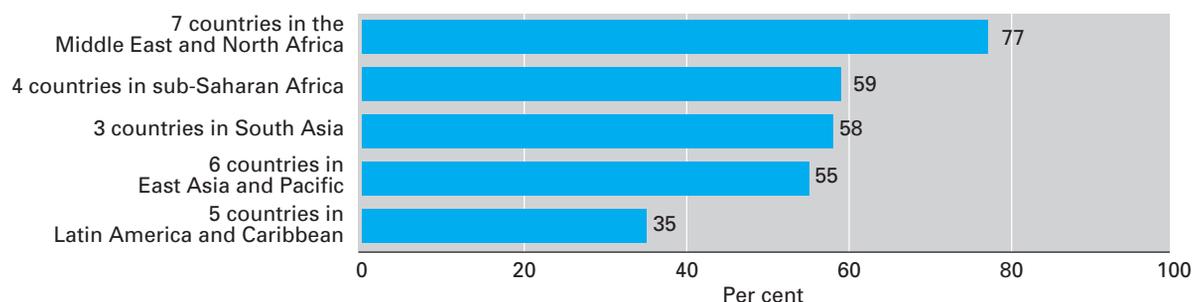
• *Double burden of public and private responsibilities:* As the preceding chapters have shown, women's work burdens are generally much heavier than men's, leaving less time and energy for involvement in political life. In the United States, evidence shows that as women's responsibilities for household tasks and caregiving decrease, their interest in running for office increases.

• *A culture of exclusion:* In many countries, both political and financial networks are controlled by men. Cultural practices that serve to nurture and consolidate bonds of male solidarity within these networks, such as drinking, smoking or golfing, are key stepping stones on the path to political office. A study in Thailand found that men typically dominate recruitment committees and tend to bypass women candidates, both in order to retain a structure they are familiar with and because they are more likely to know the male candidates personally.

• *Higher participation in education:* Those women who run for office successfully, especially in developing countries, tend to be educated to tertiary level at least. Out of the 187 women from 65 countries surveyed by the IPU in 1999, 73 per cent held an undergraduate degree and 14 per cent also held graduate degrees. The lack of women educated to tertiary levels in many countries can therefore act as a barrier to their participation in politics and government.

Women face an uphill struggle to win over public opinion. There are very few statistics about how many women run but fail to get elected.

Figure 4.2 In most of the countries surveyed, a majority of the public agrees or strongly agrees that men make better political leaders than women



UNICEF calculations are based on data derived from the World Values Survey, Round 4 (1991-2004). Data for each country and territory in the regional aggregates are for the latest year available in the period specified. The following countries and territories are included in the regional aggregates cited: **Middle East and North Africa:** Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia. **Latin America and Caribbean:** Argentina, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Chile, Mexico, Peru. **South Asia:** Bangladesh, India, Pakistan. **East Asia and Pacific:** China, Indonesia, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Viet Nam. **Sub-Saharan Africa:** Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania. Notes on the methodology employed can be found in the References section, page 88.

Source: World Values Survey, <www.worldvaluessurvey.org>, accessed June 2006.

Voter perceptions, however, can offer an instructive indication. On average, more than half the people surveyed in East Asia and the Pacific, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa agreed or strongly agreed that men make better political leaders than women, with three quarters sharing that view in the Middle East and North Africa. However, in other parts of the world, the evidence is more positive. Far fewer respondents share this view in Latin America and the Caribbean, and over 80 per cent in Thailand think that a woman could be a good prime minister.

Women leave politics. There is little data available on whether women leave office more than men due to voter hostility or outright violence sometimes directed against women who are in office (or try to run for office). Women *pradhans* (leaders) in West Bengal, India, for example, revealed that even though women delivered an amount of public goods to their villages that was equal to or higher than that of their male counterparts, villagers were not only less satisfied with their leadership but

also blamed them for the inadequate quality of services outside of their jurisdiction. Perhaps unsurprisingly, about half of the *pradhans* said they would not run again. In Afghanistan, women candidates in the 2005 election were subject to violence and, in some instances, death threats.

Myths about women in politics

Myths about women in politics, both positive and negative, abound. Because such myths rely on unrealistic assumptions about women and politics, they can easily perpetuate stereotypes and discrimination. Two such myths are discussed below.

Myth 1: Every woman will make a difference for women and for children. Just because a legislator is a woman does not mean she will automatically promote legislation that advances the interests of women and children. Women in politics are individuals who can fall anywhere on a wide spectrum of personality and ideology. Women legislators are accountable to constituencies that represent a wide variety of backgrounds and interests, and may

often find themselves divided by ideological, regional, class or other differences. Furthermore, they are members of political parties and sometimes have to follow party discipline at the expense of their own policy preferences. Nonetheless, evidence strongly suggests that, on the whole, women parliamentarians are more likely than their male counterparts to use their political leverage to effect change in support of children, women and families.

Myth 2: Women are unsuited to the 'hard' jobs. A 2005 IPU tally of ministerial portfolios held by women counted 858 women ministers in 183 countries. The distribution of portfolios, however, is striking. While almost a third of all ministerial jobs held by women fell in the area of family, children, youth and social affairs or women's affairs and education, women accounted for only 13 ministers of defence and 9 ministers of the economy worldwide (or 1.5 per cent and 1 per cent, respectively).

See References, page 88.

aging changes in the priorities and policies of national legislators, including their male colleagues.

Research suggests that male legislators today are increasingly aware of the importance of issues related to women and families, and, in many cases, are important partners in promoting gender equality. For example, in the three Latin American countries cited above (Argentina, Colombia and Costa Rica), there is strong support among male legislators for both women's issues (68 per cent) and family and children's issues (66 per cent). Although these figures are below the corresponding indicators among women legislators (94 per cent for women's issues and 79 per cent for family and children issues), qualitative research, based on interviews with parliamentarians, suggests that men's interests in these issues are on the rise.¹⁶

Changes in legislative priorities have been accompanied by subtle but significant transformations of the parliamentary environment. Two examples of such changes relate to parliamentary schedules and the availability of childcare facilities in national legislatures. As a direct result of women entering legislatures in greater numbers, parliaments in several countries – including South Africa and the United Kingdom – have amended their sitting

hours to accommodate the schedules of women with family responsibilities.¹⁷

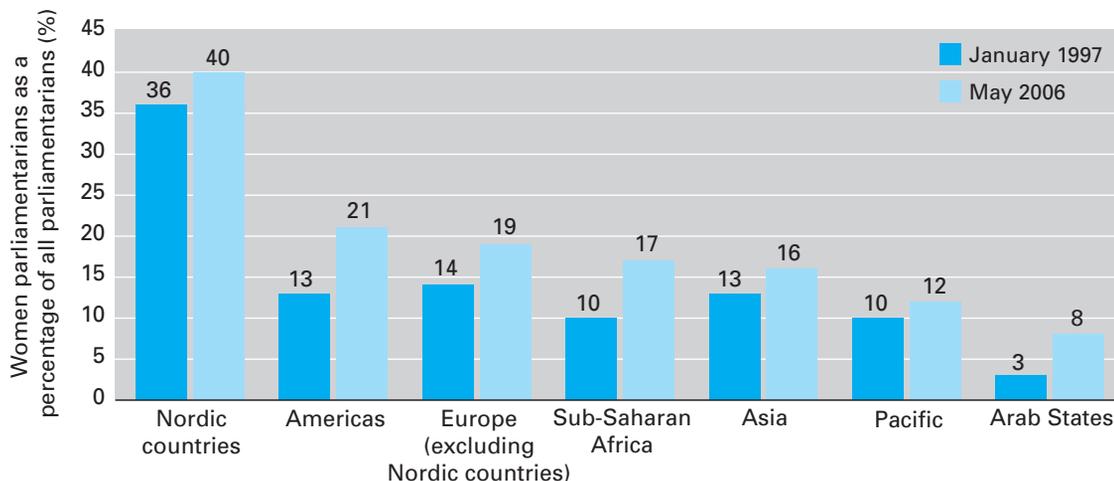
In northern Europe, Sweden's parliament has established a day-care centre for legislators,¹⁸ while in Scotland's National Assembly, a crèche was put in place for visiting constituents to “ensure that those with childcare responsibilities (usually women) can seek out and meet their representatives.”¹⁹

Few women in parliament, but signs of progress

Despite the fact that women are often among the most active political advocates for children, women and families, and that increasing their participation in parliament is a key objective of the Millennium Development Goals (specifically MDG 3), the number of women in national parliaments remains low.

Women are under-represented in all national parliaments and in July 2006 accounted for just under 17 per cent of parliamentarians worldwide. Ten countries have no women parliamentarians, and in more than 40 others women account for less than 10 per cent of legislators. Nordic countries have the highest rates of participation, with women representing around 40 per cent of parliamentarians in the combined upper and lower chambers. Arab States rank lowest, with a regional average of less than 8 per cent.²⁰

Figure 4.3 Women's participation in national parliaments across regions



Source: Data are drawn from the Inter-Parliamentary Union database on 'Women in National Parliaments', <<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>> accessed June 2006.

There are, however, encouraging trends, to a large extent due to the introduction of quotas in an increasing number of countries. The number of parliaments where women account for 30 per cent or more of the legislature – the critical yardstick of women’s parliamentary participation recognized by the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action – has increased fourfold in the past 10 years. Some of the most dramatic changes in women’s political representation have occurred in countries formerly ravaged by conflict, such as Afghanistan where women were once excluded from politics but now account for 27.3 per cent of legislators. Burundi and Timor-Leste are also examples of post-conflict countries where women now account for a sizeable number of parliamentarians (30.5 per cent and 25.3 per cent, respectively). The levels of women’s representation in all three countries are examples of the successful introduction of quotas during their political transitions.²¹

The election of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as president of Liberia in 2005 and of Michelle Bachelet to the presidency of Chile in early 2006 marked important moments in the history of women’s political leadership in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, respectively. In Eastern Europe, Latvia became the first former Soviet Republic to choose a female president as chief of state in 1999. Finland, Ireland and the Philippines also currently have women presidents (in the first two countries the president is the chief of state, while in the latter the president is both chief of state and head of government). Women are heads of government in Bangladesh, Germany, Jamaica, New Zealand, Mozambique, Netherlands Antilles and the Republic of Korea.²²

At the ministerial level, women are less well represented than they are in parliament. As of January 2005, women held 858 portfolios in 183 countries, accounting for only 14.3 per cent of government ministers worldwide.²³ Nineteen governments had no women ministers at all, and among those governments that did include women, most had a token presence of around one to three women ministers.



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As of March 2006, only three countries – Chile, Spain and Sweden – had achieved gender parity in ministerial portfolios.

Beyond the numbers

Women’s representation in national parliaments is certainly a critical measure of their political empowerment and of a country’s commitment to ensuring that powerful advocates for children can be heard. But numbers are merely a necessary benchmark and not a sufficient condition of women’s empowerment. An extensive analysis of gender budgets in developing countries, undertaken by the Commonwealth Secretariat, has shown that changed gender attitudes, even where successful, must be accompanied by adequate resources as well as the requisite skills.²⁴

Governments, in conjunction with women's organizations and political parties, have a vital role in ensuring women's empowerment. They do so by promoting gender-sensitivity among officials or establishing comprehensive women's policy forums, such as women's ministries and equal opportunity bureaus.

A comprehensive study of governments' responsiveness to violence against women between 1974 and 1994, for example, found no linear relationship between the number of women in parliament and policy initiatives aimed at reducing violence against women. Drawing on examples from 36 countries, the study revealed that governments with a high representation of women in parliament – such as Sweden, Finland and Denmark – sometimes lagged in their anti-violence policies behind such countries as Australia and Israel where the presence of women in the legislature was far weaker. The study concluded that what matters most in terms of a government's response to the needs and interests of women is not simply the number of women in parliament. Of equal importance are institutional mechanisms, such as support from political parties for women's rights, and the strength and coherence of women's organizations.²⁵

Political parties and women's groups are central to the advancement of women's participation in politics. Parties have a critical function in recruiting and endorsing candidates for elections and putting their weight behind specific items in parliamentary agendas.²⁶ Women's groups often provide the civil society impetus and expertise that are required to promote, develop and sustain the legislative initiatives and accountability mechanisms that can advance the rights of women and children (see Panel, page 59).

Women in local politics

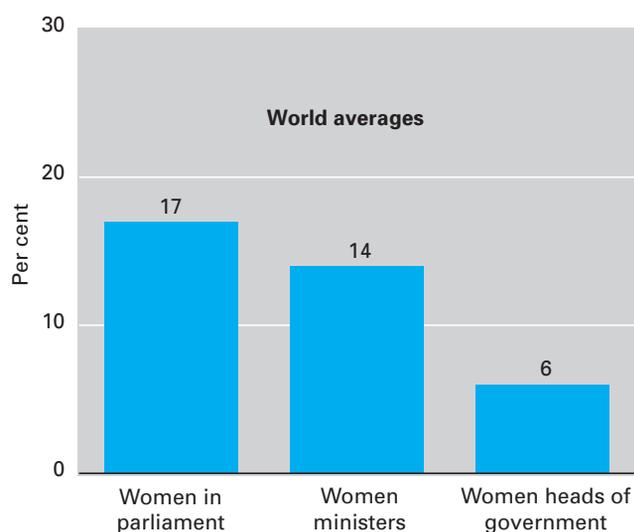
Prioritizing investments that benefit women and girls

The participation of women in local politics can have an even more immediate and direct impact on outcomes for women and children than national legislation or policies. Although evidence about the behaviour of local politicians is limited, a number of studies from both industrialized and developing countries indicate that women in local government tend to prioritize social issues. Moreover, in one important documented case in the developing world (India), women's increasing participation in local politics has led to a more equitable distribution of community resources, with direct benefits for women and children, especially girls.

In Norway, children's issues, and particularly the lack of childcare spaces, are one of the most frequently cited reasons for women entering local politics. A recent study, tracking data as far back as 1975, shows that during the first year when women were around some 30 per cent of local council members, the number of children receiving benefits increased. The most significant finding of the Norway study is that women in local government have the greatest policy impact early on in their careers because they bring a new set of concerns to the political agenda.²⁷

In the United States, a 1994 analysis of more than 9,800 bills introduced in three states over a two-year period found that women legislators were twice as likely as their male counterparts to sponsor child health bills.²⁸ Another

Figure 4.4 Women in governance



Source: Data on women in parliament and women ministers are drawn from the Inter-Parliamentary Union database on 'Women in National Parliaments', <<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>>, accessed June 2006. Data on women heads of government are derived from official websites of national governments.

Women's groups: A force for political change

There are at least two ways in which women's groups can be an important force for political change. First, these groups often provide support to women who have been elected to political office. Second, they conduct their own advocacy efforts on behalf of women, children and families.

Across the world, women's groups and networks are providing examples of how grass-roots mobilization can advance human rights, especially for the most vulnerable.

Afghanistan: Women's groups have provided significant support in mobilizing women to participate in the presidential and parliamentary elections and in monitoring the electoral process. They have also organized workshops for women refugees in order to expand their awareness of their rights.

Australia: Women's groups, along with other groups in civil society, played an important role as advo-

cates for the rights of children in immigration detention. They have lobbied for changes in domestic law and social policy and for improved services to enhance the ability of refugee families to rebuild their lives.

Morocco: In 2004, the advocacy and awareness-raising efforts of women's rights activists associated with the organization Printemps de l'Égalité (Spring of Equality) helped persuade government leaders to support a landmark family law that is meant to address women's inequality, protect children's rights and safeguard men's dignity.

Mozambique: A campaign against child marriage by several local women's groups contributed to the passage of a new family law in 2004 that raised the legal age of marriage without parental consent from 16 years to 18 years, and with parental consent from 14 years to 16 years.

Rwanda: In 2002, women parliamentarians and community leaders collaborated during the drafting of a national convention to support women's educational opportunities, small business loans provided by rural banks and the creation of a commission to lobby on behalf of vulnerable young people.

Tajikistan: The Tajikistan League of Women Lawyers drafted a national law on violence, which is currently pending approval by the president. The drafting of the law was a difficult task, but the League organized 32 workshops across the country for more than 1,100 participants, and eventually succeeded in obtaining the cooperation of local authorities, law enforcement and judicial bodies, ministries and other national institutions.

See References, page 88.

study, which examined women's political representation, showed that US states with a high percentage of women in the legislature are likely to be more supportive of efforts to address violence against women, increase child support, provide women with more extensive employment and unemployment benefits, and promote reproductive health care.²⁹

In developing countries, research on the impact of women in local government is an emerging area of enquiry. The most comprehensive findings currently available come from India, where in 1998 one third of all leadership positions in village councils were reserved for women.³⁰ An extensive research project examining the impact of the reservation policy initially surveyed 165 village councils in the state of West Bengal. The study examined the

level of public goods provision in councils that had reservation policies compared to those without such quotas.

The study found that in villages with reservation policies, investment in drinking-water facilities was double that of villages without quotas and that the roads were almost twice as likely to be in good condition. Furthermore, major roadways were 20 per cent more likely to have been recently repaired; new biogas (a substitute for cooking fuel and electricity) projects were introduced in 26 per cent of the villages with reservation policies (compared to 6 per cent in the villages without quotas); and, due to active monitoring, the number of visits by health workers in the six months covered by the study was significantly higher. These improvements were highly beneficial to

women and girls, who bear the primary responsibility for collecting fuel and water and looking after family health-care needs, particularly those of children.

Building on these initial results, the research project was expanded to examine the impact of the reservation policies on child immunization and schooling. In a survey covering 100 villages in Rajasthan, immunization surveys were administered to 30 households in each village. The surveys collected information on the immunization record of every child under the age of five. The findings indicated that a child between the age of one and five years old residing in a village reserved for a woman *pradhan* (leader) has a slightly higher probability of having completed all vaccinations. The impact of the women leaders on the school attendance of girls is even more significant: The study revealed that the presence of a woman *pradhan* reduces the gender gap in school attendance by 13 percentage points.³¹

Simply having a greater number of women in local government, however, will not guarantee their effectiveness as advocates for the interests and rights of children, women and fami-

lies. In South Africa, for example, an analysis of the problems and opportunities faced by women in local government revealed that, as with their colleagues in parliament, their effectiveness was largely determined by factors other than their numerical presence. These included cultural norms and expectations of women's roles; local hierarchies; the abilities and attributes of individual councillors; and the extent of political parties' commitment to gender equality.³²

Catalysts of change

According to a comparative analysis of women in local government in 13 countries in East Asia and the Pacific, women have enjoyed more success at gaining access to decision-making positions in local government than at the national level. Local government tends to be easier for women to fit into their lives along with family and work responsibilities. It also tends to be more accessible to them, with more positions available and less competition than for parliamentary seats. Moreover, women's decision-making roles in city and community government may be more easily accepted because they are seen as an extension of women's involvement in their communities.³³



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Yet in many countries, women's participation in local politics is often undermined by gender inequality within families, by an inequitable division of labour within households, and by deeply entrenched cultural attitudes about gender roles and the suitability of women for decision-making positions³⁴ (also see *Chapter 1, page 8*). According to United Cities and Local Governments, an organization that has been collecting data on women in local decision-making since 1998, women account for just over 9 per cent of mayors worldwide and almost 21 per cent of local councillors.³⁵

In spite of these obstacles, as more women are elected to local government, they are increasingly becoming important agents of change. In the previously cited example of villages with a reservation policy in West Bengal, India, the presence of women leaders at village meetings encouraged additional political interest and activism by other women. The attendance of women at village council meetings grew by a considerable margin – from 6.9 per cent to 9.9 per cent – when the chair was a woman *pradhan*.³⁶

Women, war and peace

Women's ability to actively shape political processes at the national and local levels, as illustrated by the case studies above, is predicated on the existence of democratic institutions and a stable political environment. However, over the past few years there has been an increasing recognition that in conflict situations characterized by instability and weak application of the rule of law, women's participation in peace processes is essential to ensure their long-term success.³⁷ Preliminary research and case studies suggest that peace agreements, post-conflict reconstruction and governance have a better chance of success when women are involved, in part because women adopt a more inclusive approach towards security and address key social and economic issues that might otherwise be ignored.³⁸

Recognizing the unique contribution that women can make to peace processes, in October 2000 the UN Security Council unanimously passed

resolution 1325, which specifically addresses the impact of war on women, and women's contributions to conflict resolution and sustainable peace. Yet women's role in peace processes remains, at best, informal. While governments and other political actors appear content to encourage engagement with women's groups that often cut across the lines of conflict, women rarely make it to the peace table. On the few occasions that they do, their voices are rarely heard.

Women's exclusion from peace negotiations means that their rights and views – as citizens, as former combatants and as victims – are not fully represented in post-conflict reconstruction processes. A recent report examining 13 peace agreements reached between 1991 and 2001 that put an end to conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bougainville (Pacific Islands), Cambodia, El Salvador, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kosovo, Liberia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone and Timor-Leste, among others, concluded that “there is no peace agreement that provides an overall model for appropriate provisions for ensuring that the needs of women are served alongside those of men.”³⁹ These agreements included, in fact, few if any provisions that related specifically or even indirectly to women – an omission reflective of the overwhelming gender imbalance among the negotiators. While resolution 1325 has brought attention to the critical importance of including women in peace negotiations, half of the agreements signed since its adoption have omitted references to the needs of women and a gender perspective.⁴⁰

Would women at the peace table make a difference?

The success of women's participation in other political arenas (as discussed earlier in this chapter) suggests that there is every reason to believe that the presence of women at the peace table would make an important difference for women and children. In the words of a former international mediator, when women are present, “the talks tend to adopt a more inclusive view of security and address issues related to the reintegration of children and women, preventing domestic

violence when ex-combatants return to their homes, getting landmines out of the ground to allow women and girls to gather firewood and water more safely, and ensuring post-conflict accountability for human rights abuses against children and women.”⁴¹ In other words, the involvement of women increases the likelihood of issues critical to

the rights and well-being of children, women and families being included in negotiations.

This notion is borne out by experiences in several countries across the world. Most famously, representatives of over 200 women’s organizations met in 1996 to create the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition, the first female-dominated political party. The movement, which included members from both Protestant and Catholic communities, worked as a cross-community party to promote civil, human and workers’ rights.⁴² The coalition was eventually credited by George Mitchell, the US senator who mediated the Northern Ireland peace talks, with helping to achieve an agreement in those negotiations.⁴³

Women and the Darfur Peace Agreement

In 2005, a Gender Experts Support Team, composed of 20 women members and backed by the governments of Canada, Norway and Sweden and by the UN Development Fund for Women was invited to participate in the seventh and decisive round of the Darfur Peace Agreement negotiations. The team gathered women from a variety of tribal and ethnic backgrounds in Darfur to create a unified platform of women’s priorities and gender issues. The outcome document, ‘Women’s Priorities in the Peace Process and Reconstruction in Darfur’, contains a number of key provisions related to women and children, including:

- Specific protections for women and children in conflict situations.
- Priority treatment for women and children in assessments related to compensation/reparations for damages and destruction caused by the war.
- An appeal to the government to pay particular attention to the education of women and children as a means of ensuring security.
- Provision of secondary education in the camps for refugees and internally displaced persons.
- A call to the international community to focus on the education needs of refugee girls.
- The creation of an institution to provide legal support, psychological counselling and other relevant services to women and children.

During the three short weeks that women were allowed to participate in the talks, they were able to negotiate for the inclusion of an impressive number of their priorities in the final agreement. The accord includes language that is gender-sensitive and, among other priorities, calls for the participation of women in decision-making bodies and in peace-building.

See References, page 88.

Women’s participation in conflict resolution processes

Across the world, women have become increasingly involved in conflict resolution processes. The Bonn talks on Afghanistan in late 2001 included 5 women out of approximately 60 delegates and advisers. During the negotiations, the women representatives fought hard for women’s rights, and their achievements included the creation of a Ministry of Women’s Affairs.⁴⁴ In Guatemala, the participation of women in the formal peace process of 1996 led to a national health programme for women and girls and a programme to reunite families and locate missing or separated children and orphans.⁴⁵ In the Philippines, women have held influential positions in formal peace processes and have pushed for cooperation across party and religious lines in the interests of peace.⁴⁶ In Sierra Leone, two women were involved in the Lome peace process. Although they were not chief negotiators, a key article of the final agreement calls for special attention to be paid to victimized women and girls in formulating and implementing rehabilitation, reconstruction and development programmes.⁴⁷ More recently, women have made a critical contribution to the Darfur peace talks (*see Panel at left*).

These experiences notwithstanding, in most conflicts women are either entirely excluded from peace negotiations or relegated to a ‘parallel’ track. Even establishing this type of track

Women as mediators and peacekeepers

An increased presence of women among peace negotiators and peacekeeping forces, among other critical actors, would greatly enhance women's contributions to conflict resolution and post-conflict rehabilitation. As a District Officer from the Ituri Province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo explained in a report to the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), "Local women [and girls] have difficulty in talking freely to uniformed men, such as male military observers, especially about sensitive issues such as sexual violence and abuse.... In many cases, especially where there is endemic violence, local women [and girls] prefer to speak to a woman peacekeeper because they fear further violence, including from male peacekeepers."

The UN is fully aware of this fact. While the number of women among the uniformed personnel (military and police forces) deployed by DPKO remains miniscule – at 4 per cent and 1 per cent, respectively – active steps taken by the department in recent years have increased the number of civilian positions held by women. These steps reflect a growing recognition that the presence of women among peacekeeping forces is critical to the success of their missions, and can reduce the possibility

that peacekeepers engage in acts of sexual exploitation and abuse against the very populations they are mandated to protect, especially young girls. Among the key findings of an investigation initiated by the UN Secretary-General into such cases was the recognition that "the presence of more women in a mission, especially at senior levels, will help to promote an environment that discourages sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly of the local population."

At the behest of the UN General Assembly, as well as the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, in June 2006 the UN Secretary-General issued a comprehensive strategy for assistance to victims of sexual abuse by UN personnel. This policy, which UNICEF helped formulate, proposes a comprehensive approach to victim support, including basic health, psychosocial, legal and administrative assistance for all victims and, in exceptional cases, financial assistance. Building on this policy, UNICEF, DPKO, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the United Nations Development Programme are organizing a high-level meeting to further address sexual exploitation and abuse in a comprehensive manner.

In addition to peacekeepers, mediators who represent the international community can act as 'tipping points' to help women secure representation in peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction. A recent assessment of women's participation in peace processes as 'track one' mediators – those involved in official negotiations through formal channels rather than unofficial contacts ('track two' mediators) – found that women remain largely excluded from conflict mediation and resolution processes. At the United Nations, women hold only 6.5 per cent of senior peace-related positions, while the European Union counts no women at all among its current and former high-level mediators. Similarly, despite Africa's deserved reputation of having strong female role models, women are entirely absent from the driving seat of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union. In conflicts where pre-agreement peace processes are ongoing, stalled or forthcoming, and where the United Nations or the European Union is not taking the lead role, only Uganda stands out for the presence of a lone female mediator.

See References, page 88.

is a challenge that requires women to fight hard to gain even limited representation, and often brings only modest success. Examples of such parallel tracks include:

- **Burundi:** In 2000, women overcame the resistance of the Burundian parties and were included as informal observers in peace talks held in Arusha, United Republic of Tanzania.⁴⁸
- **Liberia:** Even though the Liberian Women's Initiative was unable to become an official participant in the regional peace talks of 1994, its leaders proved to be highly influential consultants during the process.⁴⁹
- **Somalia:** In May 2000, 92 women delegates to the Somali National Peace Conference presented themselves as a 'sixth clan' for peace (Somalia has several major ethnic



clans, all of which were represented by men). Despite resistance from some of their male colleagues, the group helped draft a national charter that guaranteed women 25 seats in the 245-member Transitional National Assembly.⁵⁰

- **Sri Lanka:** In December 2002, a Subcommittee on Gender Issues was established, with a mandate to identify issues of concern to women and include them in the agenda of the peace process. The committee included 10 members, with each side appointing five women to focus on the gender dimension of post-conflict reconstruction. Among the top priorities of the committee were the equal representation of women in politics, educational structures and gender bias, and violence against women and girls.⁵¹

Conflict as an opportunity for change

The recognition that women are not merely victims of conflict, but critical actors whose contribution is essential to the success of peace processes and to long-term political stability is strikingly recent. As the renowned Indian economist Devaki Jain writes in *Women, Development and the United Nations*, “Until

1975, UN discussions on aspects of security and defence almost never referred to women; in the post-war conventions, male nouns and pronouns were used to represent both men and women.”⁵² It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that, as with other levels of political decision-making, the inclusion of women in peace processes requires far more than increasing their numbers and often depends on the active support of the international community.

As groundbreaking efforts by the UN Development Fund for Women to support the participation of women in peace processes in such countries as Burundi, Liberia and Somalia demonstrate, it takes many years of struggle and overcoming setbacks for these efforts to come to fruition. Sometimes simple things are needed to get women to peace negotiations. In the case of Burundi, the women’s participation hinged on obtaining funding for two taxis, which enabled them to get to the peace talks in Arusha, United Republic of Tanzania. While the male participants travelled on officially sponsored planes for less than one hour, it took the women two days to get to Arusha – but they eventually arrived. Although their participation did not

result in a formal mechanism for women's political participation, the group's influence did lead to the adoption of a number of gender-specific measures in the agreements in 2000.⁵³

Inspiring the next generation

Women's participation in national legislatures, local government and peace processes are not only transforming the politics of the present – it is also altering its future, as women in politics are changing prevailing attitudes towards women and girls in decision-making roles. While patterns of causality are difficult to define across countries and societies, recent research suggests a strong relationship between the number of women in office and positive public attitudes towards women political leaders.⁵⁴ This correlation does not prove that the presence of women in politics is shifting public opinion towards greater gender equality. But it does show a strong link between the public's confidence in women's leadership abilities and its growing expectation of seeing women in office.

In Rwanda, for example, women's role in the transition to peace and democracy has paved the way for future generations of girls to assume public roles that would have been inconceivable only a generation ago.⁵⁵ In India, new associations are strengthened by elected women representatives, as well as women who were previously elected but who no longer formally participate in local councils.⁵⁶ These two countries represent just a sample of the growing involvement of women in politics across the world. Their influence is not just being felt in stronger legislation for children and women; they are also helping decision-making bodies become more democratic and gender sensitive. Despite discrimination and setbacks, young women and men who enter politics enter a world significantly transformed by the presence of women.⁵⁷

Empowering women to participate in politics

Increasing women's participation in politics is vital to promoting gender equality and

empowering women, the two tenets of Millennium Development Goal 3. As this chapter has shown, women in politics advocate more often and more strongly for the rights of women, children and families. Yet, at current rates of progress, we are still more than 60 years away from a world where women have an equal say in national parliaments. The situation is equally unbalanced at the local level where, today, women account for less than 1 in 10 of the world's mayors.⁵⁸

While formal barriers to entering national and local parliaments have been eliminated in virtually every country, this has been insufficient to address gender imbalances in governance. Even when political spaces and processes have opened up, the number of women in decision-making positions has not automatically increased. Beginning in childhood women face discrimination, which ranges from lower levels of education to prevailing social attitudes doubting their competence as decision-makers. This discrimination, as well as women's significantly greater work burden, discourages and prevents women from entering politics and leaves them less time and energy for public life. Each of these issues needs to be addressed in its own right. Key measures – summarized below, but explored in greater detail in Chapter 5 – to ensure that women participate fully in politics include:

- **Education.** As previous chapters have underscored, a girl who is denied the right to go to school is denied much more than the knowledge she would have gained in the classroom. She is deprived of the opportunity to develop to her full potential in every area of life, including the right to political participation.
- **The involvement and support of men (in voting and in parliament).** While women's presence and active participation in politics is critical to advancing gender equality, gender initiatives require the involvement and support of men, especially male parliamentarians and political leaders.
- **Quotas.** The introduction of quotas has led to dramatic changes in women's political

The hope of justice for Bolivia's women and children

by Casimira Rodríguez Romero, Minister of Justice, Bolivia

Learning to survive

I remember that when I was six, my family was regularly hungry because of a drought. We didn't have enough to eat even twice a day, so my siblings and I were sent to another community where my grandparents grew some crops and had some goats and cows. All the same, my mom always wanted her kids, both boys and girls, to learn to read and write, so that's why she sent us to the mining town of Quioma in Mizque. There they rented a room for us.

When I got ready for school, I didn't have anyone to comb out my long braids. My brothers tried to brush them every day, but it was a disaster. The miners' kids at the school weren't used to being around indigenous girls like me. I'd never fought with anybody before, but they pulled my braids, treated me badly, and that's when I started to live with violence and discrimination. I could only speak Quechua, and it was really hard to study in Spanish. After school every day, my siblings and I went out and gathered firewood and

swapped things with the local women. They gave us sugar, noodles and bread. We missed our folks terribly, but we learned to fight, earn money and survive.

From exploitation to discrimination

At age 13, I went to live in the city of Cochabamba. With promises of earning some money, I took a job working for a merchant family for two years. The exploitation was terrible: I worked 18 hours a day looking after 15 people. I was under a lot of psychological pressure, out of touch with my family and working without pay. Eventually, even my new clothes wore out. And since I was always helping the boss's kids with their homework, I started to really want to go to school again, but it was impossible.

Luckily, my mom turned up again and I went back to my hometown. From there, I went back to Cochabamba and worked for another family. I got paid there. They were always good about paying on time

and giving me an extra month's pay at Christmas and other bonuses. But there was still a lot of discrimination: They gave me day-old bread to eat and food that had gone bad. My boss was a bit more humane, but when he died, I stayed on with his wife and she was like an evil stepmother: To her, I wasn't even a person. I worked for them as a housemaid for nine years, but it was so hard.

Consciousness and organization

A fighting spirit awoke in me when some other friends and I founded the Cochabamba Home Worker's Union in 1987. When we saw all the inequalities in the law, we realized that we only had half of our rights. We held meetings with domestic workers in La Paz, with women who were real fighters and with mining union leaders. We held national meetings and started to consolidate our group. For the next six years, we worked on the draft law, although lots of details were taken out. The first draft was pretty protectionist, but the process took on more of a

participation throughout the world. Though no such quotas exist for peace processes, their use is gaining increasing recognition as a potentially effective vehicle for ensuring women's representation at the peace table.

- **Party politics.** Political parties remain the gatekeepers to the advancement of women in politics. Within the context of party politics, however, the sanctions for non-compliance are particularly important. While it may seem impressive for a party

to commit to a 40 per cent quota for women representatives, for example, that commitment can be rendered meaningless if the candidacies of women are not actively promoted.

- **Participation in peace negotiations.** Over the past five years, active steps have been taken, particularly by the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, to ensure that UN Member States, and other political actors adhere to resolution 1325. Nonetheless, efforts to include women in

rights focus. We were able to turn our fears into courage and make the authorities listen to us. At first, our friends and even our own brothers and sisters didn't want to have anything to do with us, saying we were city folk now. But we took heart and started to hold demonstrations in order to open doors. Convinced that what we were doing was right, we started to break down the walls of discrimination – and, by insisting so much, we managed to gather support and seats on the councils of rural women's organizations. We made alliances with our peasant brothers, workers, miners, coca-leaf growers, indigenous groups and other sectors. It was a very interesting process that truly bore fruit.

The male world of politics

Along the way, we started to get support from Evo Morales's movement; as leaders, we started meeting here and there, coordinating national activities and international events. When they offered me the post of Minister of Justice, I didn't know what to do – I had to make a quick

decision! You have your (personal) plans, your family...but I put it all aside. We're going through a historic process that I just couldn't say no to. There was no way to talk it over with my colleagues. If I said no, they would have never let me live it down. So I accepted, knowing it would be hard, but it was all about recognizing that this was the next step in everything we'd been doing so far.

At first I was very worried – soon I'd be entering a very different world. In our organizations, we always just worked around other women. The world of politics is a man's world and full of professionals with different types of education and experiences; I entered into this realm very carefully. When you are a leader, you have the freedom to say what you like, but now I have to be careful about what I say, and at the same time I have to leave something behind for other women and our *compañeros* (comrades).

There's still a long way to go. In this post, I want to meet the expectations

of my brothers and sisters who have different kinds of problems. I want to fulfil the people's hopes for justice.

The boys and girls of Bolivia are living in difficult circumstances. There are huge inequalities. There are still lots of children who are going through what I did as a girl – not being able to go to school, not having safe food to eat. Our *wawas* (children) are the first ones to suffer from abuse, violence and rape. I would like to see a day when Bolivia's *wawas* can grow up enjoying the love of their parents without going hungry. It is a huge challenge. We have to make an effort to make everyone's dream of having a good life come true.

Casimira Rodríguez Romero, the current Minister of Justice in Bolivia, was born in a Quechua community in the valley of Mizque, Cochabamba. She is the fourth of 10 brothers and sisters. Her life was marked by poverty and discrimination, and her presence in Bolivia's cabinet represents the historically marginalized indigenous woman.

peace processes and post-conflict resolution remain confined to a handful of examples.

- **Better data and research.** Research on the impact of women on legislation and policy related to children remains limited, even in the industrialized countries. While UNICEF can and must play a critical role in child advocacy at all levels of government, this effort needs to be supported by better research on, and analysis of, the broader dynamic of decision-making and policy

outcomes, with a particular focus on women and girls.

- **Creating an environment where women can make a difference.** The presence of women in politics is a necessary but not sufficient condition for their political empowerment. Women's ministries and other women's political forums, as well as the commitment of governments to greater participation of women in parliament, are equally important factors in advancing gender equality.