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 support 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’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.

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 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’s groups contributed to a landmark family law that is meant to address women’s inequality, protect children’s rights and safeguard men’s dignity. In Morocco, 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. In 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 for girls without parental consent from 16 years to 18 years, and with parental consent from 14 years to 16 years.

See References, page 88.

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.

Figure 4.4 Women in governance

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<tr>
<th>World averages</th>
<th>Women in parliament</th>
<th>Women ministers</th>
<th>Women heads of government</th>
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<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
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