parliaments, to date there are 30 countries that have constitutional or statutory quotas at the subnational level. In India, for example, the results have been dramatic, as one third of seats in all local legislatures are reserved for women by a constitutional amendment. This stands in contrast to the national parliament, where women account for less than 10 per cent of all parliamentarians.43

Quotas are also gaining increasing recognition as a potentially effective vehicle for ensuring women’s representation at the peace table. In 1999, for example, after women were key participants in helping settle hostilities in southern Sudan, the United Nations Development Fund for Women partnered with a local organization on the ‘People to People’ peace process, which reserved a third of the seats in local and regional peace reconciliation meetings for women.44 Similarly, in South Africa, 41 per cent of the commissioners of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were women.45 Neither of these examples, however, involves formal peace processes. At present, no examples of such quotas exist.

While they can be effective, however, quotas are no panacea. To be effective, quotas have to match the electoral system of a country; unless they do, and unless commitments are reinforced by a political system in which rules matter and failure to comply carries consequences, the role of quotas is merely symbolic.46

**Women empowering women**

One of the most important and effective avenues for women’s empowerment is the dynamic of cooperation among women. Informal women’s collectives organize around such issues as nutrition, food distribution, education and shelter, contributing to an improved standard of living for women, their families and communities.46 But even though women’s social networks tend to be wider than those of men, they tend to command fewer economic resources.47

Women’s groups need to be recognized as important agents of empowerment and development. Governments and development agencies must include them in poverty reduction strategies and nurture long-term partnerships. By working with women’s organizations at the community level and channelling development resources through them, international development agencies can help increase the likelihood that resources will reach the most vulnerable members of poor communities – women and children. Involving women in the early stages of policy development help ensure that programmes will be designed with the needs of women and children in mind.

Grass-roots women’s movements are vocal and active champions of women’s equality and empowerment and have campaigned successfully for CEDAW and other conventions mandated to improve the situation of women and girls at the international level. The benefit of women’s groups is even more evident at the local level, where they are working to improve the quality of life for their families.

**Engaging men and boys**

Men can make a crucial contribution to ending gender discrimination. Globally, men continue to dominate decision-making processes in households, economies and governments. In addition, men’s participation in initiatives to promote gender mainstreaming and gender equality remains low. Such initiatives may be perceived as a threat to their status and power.

By making child-friendly choices and supporting women in their capacities as decision-makers, men can be powerful allies in the struggle for women’s equality. Evidence shows that men are more likely to be active, hands-on fathers when they feel positive about themselves and their relationship with the child’s mother, when they have support for active involvement in their children’s lives from family and friends, and when they are in employment.48

**Involving men**

Men are often the dominant household decision-makers, yet they tend to be overlooked by programmes that improve conditions for women and children.44 In one Indian state, for instance, researchers discovered that advocacy campaigns on nutrition were targeted to women, even though approximately 20 per cent of fathers made the decisions regarding children’s nutrition.49

UNICEF’s experience shows that programmes that focus on males provide ways to promote positive gender socialization. Programmes that...