

# Women and Participatory Politics: The Need To Represent and Be Represented

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## Introduction

Democratic transitions in many countries have ushered in new ideas about the citizen's role in political life. The meaning of democracy and the responsibilities it entails are continuously being negotiated in new contexts of ideological exploration and citizen aspiration. In recent years, as the process of democratization has become more widespread, the complex relationship between governance and women's empowerment has come under increasing scrutiny by academics, development practitioners, and grassroots constituencies.

One of the key issues at hand is whether the establishment of democracy can foster an environment in which groups that have traditionally been excluded from full involvement in economic and political arenas—such as women—can gain greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives. It has also become critical to determine whether new systems of “good governance” allow women to gain political skills, claim individual and collective rights, participate in public decision making processes, and establish a more equal footing with their male counterparts. Approaches to the overall empowerment of women have begun to integrate tools and strategies designed to promote democratic values, practices, and institutions.

What is therefore clearly needed is a new understanding of the relationship between governance and women, as well as new strategies for strengthening the inclusion of women in the democratization process. There are barriers, and they are not peculiar to this country. As this paper will show, barriers to women's representation, and thus being represented by women are almost universal to developed and developing countries.

## Political systems

The principle of equality of women and men has been affirmed in the constitutions and laws of most countries and in all international instruments. In the last 50 years women have not achieved equality, and their inequality has been reinforced by their low level of participation in public and political life. Policies developed and decisions made by men alone reflect only part of human experience and potential. The just and effective organization of society demands the inclusion and participation of all its members.

No political system has conferred on women both the right to and the benefit of full and equal participation. While democratic systems have improved women's

opportunities for involvement in political life, the many economic, social and cultural barriers they continue to face have seriously limited their participation. Even historically stable democracies have failed to integrate fully and equally the opinions and interests of the female half of the population. Societies in which women are excluded from public life and decision-making cannot be described as democratic. The concept of democracy will have real and dynamic meaning and lasting effect only when political decision-making is shared by women and men and takes equal account of the interests of both.

### **Obstacles to Women's Political Participation**

In spite of efforts by women's organizations in many countries, women have yet to see enormous payoffs in terms of elected officials and political appointments. Women often lack the resources, political experience, education and political connections to run for office. Popular perceptions often suggest that women's "proper" place is still in the home rather than in politics. Prohibitive cultural attitudes against women's involvement persist among both men and women.

These are reflected in voting patterns, media coverage of female politicians, and even in blatant attempts to suppress women's assertion of their political rights and views. In Uganda, for example, the 1996 presidential elections saw increasing incidents of intimidation and harassment of wives by husbands over differing political opinions. Throughout the country there were reports of women who were threatened with withdrawal of family support. Some were killed, beaten, thrown out of homes, and some had their voters' cards grabbed from them or destroyed. One of the consequences of this experience was that women did not turn out to vote in the parliamentary elections in such large numbers, partly because of harassment. As Christine Lalobo explained:

"So some of them were saying, 'if I can't exercise my rights in my own way and freedom, then I shouldn't go there at all. Otherwise I am going to risk going out with a swollen eye.'"<sup>1</sup>

But women themselves are also reticent to run for office (both national and local government positions) for many reasons. Partly the reluctance stems from cultural prohibitions on women being seen and speaking in public in front of men.

Where these prohibitions are strong, men do not listen to women who take the podium or are active in politics in other ways. Campaigning and being a leader often involves travel, spending nights away from home, going to bars to meet people, and meeting men, all of which put women politicians at risk of being thought of as "loose women" or "unfit mothers." This is more so if they are Muslims.

Thus not only may they find themselves and their families under attack or the subject of malicious gossip, but, husbands sometimes will forbid their wives from entering into politics. Some husbands are threatened by the possibility that their wives will interact with other men, others fear the social stigma directed against

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<sup>1</sup> "Politician Hubby Snatchers Should be Censored." *Monitor*, 8 May 1996.

their wives, or they worry that their wife's political preoccupations will divert her attention away from the home. Ferguson and Katundu found in Zambia that most women who were active in politics claimed they experienced marital problems as a result of their involvement (1994, 18).<sup>2</sup>

Even in parliamentary bodies, women have difficulty being taken seriously, being listened to, and are frequently subjected to humiliating stereotypes and derogatory remarks. One excellent and detailed study of women in parliamentary politics in Uganda found sexual harassment rampant, even in a parliament where women had been active and visible for over a decade (Tripp 1999).<sup>3</sup>

Many of the stereotypes of women politicians are reflected in a comments made by men and women in Tanzania's Sukumaland in a rural area near Mwanza (Andersen 1992, 161, 260, 263).<sup>4</sup> While one cannot generalize too much from these perceptions, they are heard enough in other parts of Africa to give some indication of what cultural constraints women are up against in entering into politics:

When I was elected as a village secretary some people told me that I would become a loose woman, a prostitute. I told them that I could never do such a thing and second, I asked them whether they had any proof of the misbehavior of other women leaders to which they referred? Their answer was "No, this is just what we have heard" (Young woman Chama cha Mapinduzi party leader).

There are women who are capable of being leaders, and good leaders too. But it is not easy. Men very often do not trust their wives and think that if they go for seminars, they will betray their husbands. A woman is like a child as far as the brain is concerned, she can easily be convinced by another man to give way for sex" (Young male Chama cha Mapinduzi party leader). Normally husbands are the main causes for their wives not to be leaders . . . .

Many of the women are very eager to be leaders. But your husband can ban you and then that is the end. We ask husbands to allow their wives to contest, but many of them dislike it . . . . Here there are many women who are able to work, to lead, and who can build our nation. After all, some are properly educated, but because the husband is in a panic, his wife remains a house wife (Woman Chama cha Mapinduzi party official).

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<sup>2</sup>Ferguson, Anne, Kimberly Ludwig, Beatrice Liatto Katundu, and Irene Manda. 1995. *Zambian Women in Politics: An Assessment of Changes Resulting from the 1991 Political Transition*. East Lansing: Michigan State University.

<sup>3</sup>Tripp, Aili Mari. *Women & Politics in Uganda*. Oxford: James Currey; Kampala: Fountain Publishers; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999.

<sup>4</sup>Andersen, Margrethe Holm. "Women in Politics: A Case Study of Gender Relations and Women's Political Participation in Sukumaland, Tanzania." Ph.D., Aalborg University, Denmark, 1992.

In spite of all these limitations on women's involvement in political leadership, women are not reluctant to participate in other aspects of politics. Women often vote in numbers very similar to or greater than those of men, as seen in electoral turnout figures of elections in Mozambique and Zambia in the 1990s (Jacobson 1995<sup>5</sup>; Longwe and Clark 1991<sup>6</sup>). As one Zambian member of parliament put it:

Women do all the campaigning and organize rallies for men. But now we have to switch to do the same for ourselves. Women are still in the mold of campaigning for men, not for women. Women are waiting to be invited to participate but no one will invite them (Mbikusita-Lewanika 1995)<sup>7</sup>.

However, a trend has been started to reverse this in Africa. In the 1990s, for the first time in the post-independence period greater numbers of African women began to aspire to political leadership at the national and local levels. Although their impact was still minimal and the obstacles daunting, new female faces and voices began to be seen and heard. The 1990s was a decade of beginnings for women in politics in Africa and all indications are that we will see even greater pressures for female political representation and participation in the decade ahead.

Until the 1990s it was unheard of for women to run for the presidency in Africa. Yet in the 1990s, Charity Ngilu and Wangari Maathai ran in the 1998 Kenyan presidential election and Ngilu has announced plans to run again in 2002. Rose Rugendo of Tanzania's party Chama Cha Mapinduzi sought her party's nomination in the 1995 presidential primaries as did Sarah Jibril in Nigeria in 1989. Although unsuccessful in these bids for power, these women set an important precedent in their respective countries.

The first head of an African state in the last century was Zauditu, empress of Ethiopia, who ruled between 1917 and 1930. Other female heads of state have included Dzeliwe Shongwe, Queen-regent of Swaziland, who ruled in 1982-1983, followed by Ntombi Thwala, Queen-regent of Swaziland, 1983-1986. Elizabeth Domitien was Africa's first female prime minister, serving in the Central African Republic between 1975-1976. But it was not until the 1990s that women claimed national leadership visibility in greater numbers. Ruth Perry has been on the six-member collective presidency of Liberia, chairing this Council of State since September 1996. She is the first non-monarchical head of an African state. In 1994 Uganda's Wandera Specioza Kazibwe became the first female Vice President in Africa.

Sylvie Kinigi served as prime minister of Burundi from 1993 to 1994, and during this same period, Agathe Uwilingiyimana was prime minister of Rwanda until she

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<sup>5</sup>Jacobson, Ruth. "Dancing Towards a Better Future? Gender and the 1994 Mozambican Elections," Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), 1994. Unpublished paper.

<sup>6</sup>Longwe, Sarah, and Roy Clarke. "A Gender Perspective on the Zambian General Election of October 1991." 1991. Unpublished paper.

<sup>7</sup>Mbikusita-Lewanika, Inonge Hon. Presentation to USAID Gender and Democracy in Africa Workshop, Washington, D.C., 28 July 1995.

was assassinated in office. Senegal also claimed a woman vice president in 2001. By the end of the decade, the Ethiopian, Lesotho, and South African legislative bodies had female speakers of the house and Uganda, Zimbabwe and South Africa had female deputy speakers, as Table 1 shows:

Region	Change in Representation of Women in Legislatures, %					% change
	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	1960-2000
Eastern Europe/Eurasia	23.11	25.37	31.10	9.10	11.44	-50
Eastern Asia	5.98	6.33	9.16	9.88	11.92	99
Pacific	2.50	1.86	1.31	3.41	5.98	139
Mid-East/North Africa	2.00	2.06	3.39	3.52	4.84	142
South Asia	1.94	2.98	4.47	5.07	5.56	186
Scandinavia	9.66	10.42	21.24	31.86	37.58	289
Western Europe	3.25	3.21	7.16	10.61	17.49	438
North America	2.90	1.35	4.35	9.85	16.40	465
Latin America	2.00	3.74	7.54	9.44	13.18	559
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.94	2.21	6.46	7.78	9.90	953
Overall	4.93	5.41	8.74	9.14	12.21	148

Data compiled from Inter-Parliamentary Union, Women in Parliaments, 1945-1995: A World Statistical Survey, Series "Reports and Documents," No. 23, Geneva, 1995; <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm> ("Women in National Parliaments: Situation as of 25 September 2000).

## Problems of Women Politicians — In Their Own Words

Dato Napsiah Omar from Malaysia: "Women have been disadvantaged by their lack of financial resources. Access to campaign funds is the key to increasing the participation of women in politics."

Speciosa Kazibwe from Uganda recalls: "Women hoping to succeed in politics must be able to deliver. It demands professionalism and attention at all times to performance - 'performance' is the key to 'credibility'.

Urmia Johnson of Guyana argues: For aspiring women politicians, "it is essential to build a firm base of community involvement and grass roots activism. One has to get out there with the people!"

Margaret Alva of India, a strong advocate of affirmative action for women states that: "women should avoid restricting themselves to 'women's issues' and should garner the support of their male counterparts".

Syeda Begum Sjeda Chowdhury of Bangladesh says: "A woman political leader must be in for the long haul." She recognizes that women must be encouraged to be more independent and self-reliant, and that social norms and cultural values need to be re-oriented".<sup>8</sup>

Further specific barriers to women's participation in politics were identified as:

- cultural and traditional impediments and attitudes;

<sup>8</sup>"Women in Politics: Voices from the Commonwealth" [http://www.thecommonwealth.org/gender/htm/whatwedo/activities/politics/women\\_in\\_politics.htm](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/gender/htm/whatwedo/activities/politics/women_in_politics.htm)

- male fears;
- lack of money;
- low self esteem, lack of confidence and leadership skills;
- inadequate information on political processes;
- literacy, including basic literacy and political/legal literacy;
- inadequate numbers and solidarity among women;
- polarization between political parties.

### **Women and Political Participation in...Thailand**

These problems and gains were not only peculiar to Africa; they are prevalent in other parts of the developing world. In Thailand, for instance, participation of women in village councils is low because public representation is perceived to be a masculine domain, and because business meetings are often held outside the village and late into the night, making it more difficult for women to attend. Since important economic decisions are made by the council, such as the location of a new well or the selection of representatives from the village to take part in training programs on new farming technology, women's interests are adversely affected by their low representation.

There are several other structural and cultural barriers to women's participation in local government. The previous exclusion of women reinforced the idea that local government was appropriate only for men. There is a cultural preference for men to hold positions of power that entail decision-making, and women tend to be excluded from the political and patronage networks that dominate public life at all levels in Thailand. Other factors include the lower education levels among women in the past, and the greater demands of household management placed on women, especially those in low-income rural households.<sup>9</sup> However, women are becoming increasingly active in "grassroots" political movements, such as the Assemblies of the Poor, and small popular movements seeking to gain legal recognition of their land-ownership rights in the Northeast.

In 1994, another door was opened for women's participation in local administration with the passing of the Sub-district Council and Sub-district Administrative Organization Act, under a decentralization policy (one sub-district consists of about eight villages). Elected officials will gradually replace appointed ones, who are almost all male. Government agencies on the development of women and women's NGOs have been campaigning for and training women to run in these elections. Female candidates now represent on average 10 percent. In the last election, they represented 0.8 percent of those elected.

### **Women and Political Participation in...Korea**

In Korea, the women's movement played an active role during the 1991 local autonomy elections. This is because the leaders realized how important it is for

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<sup>9</sup>Nongyao Nawarat. 1994. Promotion of Women in Local Government in Thailand. In Anne Seyfferth (ed.) *Women Claim Their Rights in Local Politics: Strategies to Increase Women's Participation in Local Government and Administrative in South and Southeast Asia*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bangkok.

women to make inroads into policy-making positions within various government agencies.

Considering the progress they have made in education as well as other sectors of society, women's participation in national politics has been less than satisfactory. As of June 1998, the number of National Assembly women was 11, or 3.4% of the total, and the female ratio of the provincial and local council seats was just 2.3%. Of the 11 lawmakers, eight are from their party's proportional representation slate, and only three have been directly elected by the electorate.

Out of 3490 local council members, only 56, or 1.6%, are women. Of the 690 provincial and metropolitan council members, only 41, or 5.9%, are women. Fourteen directly elected female member of the provincial/metropolitan councils represent just 2.3% of all 616 members elected.

This under-representation of women in political affairs is attributed to the stereotype that politics is basically a man's territory. Political parties have been lukewarm in recruiting and nurturing prospective female public officers as well as placing special significance on assisting the women candidates. The Kim Dae-jung Administration is working on ways to expand women's political representation.

Women's organizations are demanding that the election system be changed to accommodate more female representation by nominating more candidates in the districts where voters are receptive to women and women's issues. They have also proposed that public political funds be set up for women and that a certain quota for female candidates be set aside on the political party's proportional slates.

In 1989, the government actually came up with a 30% quota system for women in various public commissions to be implemented by the year of 2005. However, President Kim Dae-jung has updated that target year to 2002. All government agencies are expected to diligently comply with the President.

As of June 1998, two of 17 (11.8%) cabinet members were women. One of these members with a minister-level position heads the Presidential Commission on Women's Affairs. There is no woman vice minister. The number of female civil servants is 913,104, or 27.8% of the total. The number of grade 5 and higher female civil servants is 737 persons, or 2.5% of the total.

As of July 1997, the number of female diplomats was 47, or 3.8% of the total. As of December 1996, women judges numbered 72, or 5.6%; there were 31 women prosecutors, or 2.6%. In 1996, the government decided to set a goal of increasing the ratio of Grade-5 woman administrators and diplomats and grade-7 administrators to 20% of the total, respectively. To this end, the Tax, Railroad, Police Academies and other civil servants training schools are increasing women's enrollment in these programs.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Women and Youths in Korea, at <http://www.korea.net/learnaboutkorea/society/women-rel.html>

## **Women and Political Participation in....The Pacific Region**

The Pacific region mirrors a worldwide phenomenon. According to a report<sup>11</sup>, there are fewer women Members of Parliament than men. While New Zealand and Australia have higher proportions of women in political office than the neighboring Pacific Island countries, women report a lack of support and the persistence of stereotypical attitudes in Parliament and the media, which undermine their political activity. In spite of the growth in democratic political systems, gender equality in political decision-making is far from being achieved.

In Pacific Island countries only a few women have been elected to political office. Women find that they are at the crossroads of social, economic and cultural change. Those who seek election to Parliament often add their political work to paid employment, and their traditional responsibilities of looking after families and educating children. Pacific women parliamentarians feel a special responsibility to mainstream gender issues and to make women's voices heard in Parliaments of the region.

There is a lack of political will at national level, few commitments and inadequate resources to increase women's participation in political decision-making. Women's potential contribution to political and other public decision-making, and to peace initiatives and conflict resolution, is underutilized.

Many women are reluctant to enter politics because of the societal perception that politics is primarily a male domain. They are deterred by the confrontational nature of politics. Nepotism, corruption, the pressure on voters, and the character assassination and sexual harassment of women politicians, are all barriers to women's participation. Activity to eliminate violence, expose corruption and educate citizens and civil society is severely under-resourced.

The prevailing male-dominated political environment of confrontation, harsh competition, closed male networks and excessively long hours of work, constitute additional barriers to women's participation in politics.

Women's poverty, burden of multiple roles, higher illiteracy rates, and lack of access to educational opportunities and to new information technologies, are further barriers to their participation in political and other public spheres.

Different value systems and perceptions are applied to women and men politicians. Higher expectations are demanded of women; many cited personal experiences of harsher criticisms directed at them by both women and men.

## **Women and Political Participation in....South Africa**

The Importance of women's participation in local government in Southern Africa  
Local governments play a key role and have an even greater potential for promoting democracy and participation of more people in the affairs of the state.

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<sup>11</sup> Commonwealth Pacific Symposium On Gender, Politics And Conflict/ Peace Gender, Politics And Conflict/ Peace Wellington, New Zealand, 16-19 June 2000: Recommendations And Strategies For Action Strategies For Action.



In straddling the city and municipals councils to the lower councils, local government structures can be a major avenue for people's voices and power. Municipal and local authorities manage a huge range of issues of concern to local residents including public health. Medical services, licensing local trading, commercial and industrial activity, education, and environmental regulation. The significance of local authorities will increase, particularly in countries where there is a move towards decentralization and devolution of power. They will benefit from additional resources and a bigger say in national policy on matters falling within their jurisdiction.

Given this scenario, the importance of the participation of women in local government cannot be over-emphasised. Through such participation, women can influence decisions made at the local government level to ensure that they are gender sensitive and able to support the empowerment of women. Women in local government can be a conduit for women in communities can communicate their concerns and aspirations to the local authorities. In addition to playing a critical role in the advancement of women, they can use the experience an opportunity to build a constituency, personal stature and confidence to stand for national elective office. In this regard local government becomes a crucial stage for the woman to develop a career in politics both at the local and national level. Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs at their meeting in 1996 urged governments to achieve 30% women in legislative bodies by 2005. In 1996, only Tanzania, Botswana and Namibia had achieved this critical mass of women n local government, though some progress had been made in other countries. Table 2 gives a summary of the contemporary situation:

Country	Women Councillors %	Election Year
Tanzania	33	1995
Botswana	30	1992
Namibia	30	1992
South Africa	19.4	1995
Lesotho	6.6	1995
Swaziland	6.2	-
Zambia	2	1994

There are many factors contributing to low levels of women's representation in local government despite very significant improvements in the number of women in the labour force of both the formal and informal economy. Factors cited by both women and men as preventing the participation of women are: culture and the gendered view of politics, the legal and political awareness among women and men at the community level and the organizing capacity of women, including linkage with existing women's movements.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Southern African Regional Symposium on Women in Local Government Johannesburg 7-10 May 1996, <http://www.thecommonwealth.org/gender/htm/whatwedo/activities/politics/sasympo.htm>

## Conclusions

It is common for citizens (particularly women) in transitional societies or emerging democracies to be resigned to the idea that they cannot change things or improve their circumstances. Even in instances of entrenched attitudes of powerlessness formed over decades of authoritarian rule, however, tools and knowledge are available for individuals and communities to transform their thinking.

## Action by Governments

1. Governments and political parties should commit themselves to changing the culture of politics by eradicating gender discrimination, corruption, monetization and violence, which deter women's entry into politics, and by promoting greater transparency and democratic principles.
2. Governments must ensure that where public funds are allocated to political parties they are equally available to female and male candidates.
3. Where appropriate, governments should consider short-term affirmative action measures of quotas/reserved seats for women in Parliament and local government, in order to achieve a critical mass of at least 30 per cent of women's representation.
4. Governments should put in place policies and measures to achieve gender equality in senior decision-making positions and should actively encourage women to participate in politics.
5. Government appointees to statutory boards, agencies and other bodies should be exposed to gender sensitization/training. Such bodies should be required to include gender issues in their mandates.
6. Gender sensitization/ training program should be made available for male and female leaders in all sectors, in order to increase understanding and active support for gender equality goals and initiatives in the country.
7. Gender targets should be required in statements of departmental objectives, in annual appropriations, and in the employment contract of the Chief Executive of each Ministry and Department.
8. Education and curriculum development from pre-school to tertiary level should be gender-sensitive and should not promote those cultural practices which discriminate against women.
9. Training for participation of women in politics and other leaders is recommended in areas such as:
  - how the political system works;
  - rights of candidates;
  - political campaigning;
  - image building;
  - media relations;
  - parliamentary procedures;
  - interpretation of Bills;
  - drafting of Bills;
  - Standing Orders;
  - new information and communication technologies;
  - barriers in relations between women due to internalized sexism;
  - gender analysis/ planning;

- gender-aware research and data analysis;
- Northern Nigerian women's history;
- civic education;
- negotiation, mediation and conflict resolution;
- debating;
- lobbying strategies;
- participatory leadership;
- participatory methods of work;
- organization building and community development;
- partnerships and coalition building;
- legal and constitutional matters;
- budget analysis;
- finance and expenditure;
- sustainable development issues, e.g., globalization, macro- and micro- economic issues;
- foreign affairs;
- employment relations;
- human rights;
- ethical considerations;
- interview techniques.

### **Action by Political Parties**

10. Political parties should strive to ensure that high numbers of women candidates contest elections, in order to achieve the Commonwealth minimum target of 30 per cent of women in Parliament by 2005.
11. Political parties should use affirmative action/establish quotas for internal party offices and external positions on behalf of the party. They should also ensure gender parity among key office holders in the party through a combination of reservations and ensuring gender parity in the list of candidates.
12. Political parties should ensure that women candidates are assigned to seats where they stand a good chance of winning (where the first-past-the-post system prevails) or are strategically placed on the list (where the proportional representation system prevails).
13. Political parties should nominate equal numbers of male and female candidates for constituencies considered to be equally winnable, thus increasing the chances of selection of female candidates. Consideration should be given to the system of "twinning" constituencies and creating a single selection committee, which then selects a male and female candidate for the two seats in question.
14. Where no incumbent party member is seeking to stand, a candidate could be chosen from women-only shortlists to increase political parties' representation to the 30 per cent target.
15. Female candidates tend to be less well financed than male candidates, particularly where they run as independents as is often the case. It would assist female independent candidates if ceilings were imposed on election-related spending by political parties.

16. Political parties should:
- develop other funding strategies where political parties are not publicly funded for supporting women candidates;
  - produce and disseminate gender-sensitive voter education and election campaign materials, which address issues including character assassination and other negative treatment of women candidates;
  - be an effective point of entry and training ground for promoting women in politics, and give ongoing moral and practical support to women politicians in the party;
  - establish linkages and mobilize across party lines to encourage other women to enter politics.

#### **Action by the Media**

17. The media should be encouraged to present positive images of women leaders and politicians, and to steer away from focusing their commentary on women leaders' physical appearance.
18. Media/press associations should be encouraged to report on conflict situations from a gender perspective.