

# WOMEN IN POLITICS

The Chinese man carried on his back three mountains: feudalism, capitalism and superstition. The Chinese woman carried two more on top of the three: ignorance and a man.

Mao Tse Tung

As early as the latter part of the 19th century, feminists in the West claimed the franchise for women, in accordance with the Human Rights Charter which recognized equality of rights for all people, regardless of sex or race.

In 1893, New Zealand granted women the right to vote, then over 12 countries from North Europe and North America followed suit. In Asia, Burma was the first state to adopt this measure in 1922. In Latin America, woman's political rights were first acknowledged by Ecuador in 1929. During the first quarter of the 20th century, the number of states which granted women the right to vote doubled. Between 1920 and 1975 this number jumped from 21 to 129.

At present, only 9 countries deny political rights to women: Bahrain, Kuwait, Liechtenstein (a tiny state between Switzerland and Austria), Nigeria (six northern states only), Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen Arab Republic.

## Political Rights are not Enough

The recognition of women's political rights in almost all the countries of the world does not ensure their actual exercise of political power. Investigation recently carried out in the Arab countries shows that a large number of women do not participate in political election and those who do "often simply obey the instructions of their male family members in choosing among candidates." Newland, "Women in Politics" p. 7). In Egypt, for example, the number of women who voted in 1971 elections did not exceed one tenth of the whole body of voters.

If we try to analyze the causes of this inertia we may mention at least three. The first is woman's traditional diffidence and feeling of inferiority. The second is the high proportion of illiteracy among them (about 85 per cent in Arab countries, 83 per cent in Africa). The third is their lack of political awareness, their total ignorance of political affairs and of their importance in woman's liberation.

The third factor is probably the most influential. In Mexico, for example, in spite of the cult of male dominance and corresponding female passivity, Mexican women indicated a high level of political awareness when they made up nearly half of the registered voters in 1953, the first year they were enfranchised. "India also

combines low social status for women with a high level of politicization. In 1971, women comprised over 40 per cent of its total electors. "(Newland, p. 7). In Western Europe there is an almost equal number of male and female voters. In the United States, women voters are more numerous because their number exceeds that of men by almost 4 million.

#### **Their meager role in government**

All over the world the direct role of women in government is very low and their numbers in public office are highly limited. Though in some countries such as France, Sweden, Guinea and the Central African Republic, political leaders succeeded in bringing women into their governments, they usually consigned to them the less important areas: health, welfare social services and so forth. This sex-role stereotype in government prevails in many countries. In New Zealand, the female cabinet member is the minister for the Environment and for Tourism. In Sweden (1969) two female ministers hold the portfolios of Disarmament and Family Affairs. In Egypt, she is the Minister of Social Affairs. In Syria, the first woman appointed in the ministry in 1976 is in charge of Culture and National Guidance. In the U.S. the only woman Secretary of State heads the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

In some other countries, women succeeded in reaching high positions by way of elections. In India, the office of prime minister was for a long time occupied by Indira Gandhi. Isabella Peron succeeded her husband as president of Argentina and Mrs. Bandaranaike was elected in Sri Lanka to the same Leadership office occupied by her husband. Yet we should remember that each of these three women owed at least part of her political ascendance to her association with a prominent male politician. A father in the case of the first, a husband in the case of the other two.

#### **Women in civil service**

"In the majority of countries, women are probably more active in local politics than they are at the national level. According to a table published by Kathleen Newland in already quoted "Women in Politics", women's participation in state and local office is relatively high in China, Finland, Guinea, Netherlands, Sweden, U.S.S.R. and has been rising in the U.S. and in Norway since 1975.

It is generally believed that urban women, especially

in developing countries, have the best chances for achievement in politics because they have easier access to new ideas. This is not always the case. In the U.S., small towns and rural areas contribute a large share of the women in state legislatures. In Algeria, in spite of the present conservative view of women's role, women made their greatest gains in small country towns.

#### **Women in political parties**

There is no doubt that in communist countries like China and the U.S.S.R., the prevalence of one-party rule facilitated the application of communist principles recommending the equality of the sexes. Women in these two countries have achieved a large share of freedom in comparison with their condition in pre-revolutionary days. But it would be incorrect to say that they have reached complete equality with men. Though the proportion of women in the dominant Russian party has lately reached 22.6 per cent, this figure misrepresents political reality because in the upper age brackets women outnumber men by about 40 per cent, mostly due to the high losses in men during World War II. In China, the proportion of women in the Chinese Communist Party is probably lower than that in the Soviet party.

In almost all countries, women are represented in political parties, yet it is common for them to be isolated in women's divisions "that are far removed from policy making and public leadership. Within the parties, they are still concentrated in the lower ranks of the party hierarchy. (Newland, p. 22). Typically, women play supporting roles for male politicians, and are deprived of the experience that qualifies them for selection as candidates to responsible positions.

Exceptions to this rule are Margaret Thatcher who heads Britain's Conservative Party, and Elizabeth Domitien who rose through ranks of the national party in the Central African Republic to become Prime Minister. The Congress Party of India has had women in its upper ranks since it was formed. But these women, as we have just said, "remain newsworthy exceptions."

#### **Reactionary policies**

In a few developing countries of Asia, more particularly those of the Middle East, a wave of reaction and defiance to Western ideas has been noticeable since these countries achieved their independence. This wave takes the form of an ambivalent attitude toward woman's

## **Sweden Bans "War" Toys**

Toy manufacturers and the Swedish Consumer Agency and the Play Council (representing the government) reached an agreement Jan. 8 1979, to ban the production and sale of war toys in Sweden. This campaign implemented a decision of the European meeting of youth and stu-

dents in Warsaw, in 1976, to press for the ban of war toys.

The campaign was also taken up by the International Playground Association in the Malta Declaration of the Child's Right to Play, and by the World Council of Organizations of the Teaching Profession.

In Austria, Kinderfreunde (a children's organization) has been campaigning for some time for a ban on the manufacture and sale of war toys. In the Federal Republic of Germany, the Minister of Justice told toy manufacturers he wanted a reduction in war toys.

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emancipation, encouraging traditions that subjugate and restrict her: the veil, polygamy, easy divorce for men and the subordinate position of women within the family.

### Women's supporters

In contrast to this reactionary wave, a certain number of leaders in developing countries have given their full support to women's cause. One of them is Sékou Touré, the leader of the Guinean Party who has portrayed himself as their champion and "they in turn are an important part of his power base and are said to have considerable impact on national decision-making. (Newland p. 19). Guinean women occupy positions at every level of the Guinean Democratic Party and are present in strength in the trade unions, cooperatives and market associations. Polygamy and divorce by renunciation were outlawed soon after independence. Women have not followed Touré and the Party policies blindly, however. For instance, when the women's committees of the G.D.P. (Guinean Democratic Party) were abolished in 1964 because they were said to be causing strife in the local organizations and in the family, pressure from the women soon forced Touré to reestablish the women's sections.

Another leader of a developing country, who greatly contributed to the liberation of his country-women, is the Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba who was able to secure women's equality with men in all fields including education, work, right to divorce, nationality, ownership and control of property, political status and military service. Polygamy has been forbidden in Tunisia, family-planning is encouraged, the right to adopt children is recognized and adopted children have the same rights as legitimate ones.

### Women's Organizations — a political force

They exist in large numbers and represent a great variety. From the political point of view, they may be grouped under three categories: those whose explicit reason for existence is political action, those whose political involvement stems from an interest in a particular issue or set of issues and those whose political power comes from the numerical strength and solidarity of their membership. The second category holds the bulk of women's organizations, those whose purpose is not explicitly political but that enter the political arena as interest-group actors on behalf of a particular cause. They often lobby on behalf of legislation, concern themselves with women's issues that lack other advocates: marriage and divorce laws, reproductive freedom, equal pay and equal educational opportunity.

The third type of organization yields political power by virtue of its size and certain homogeneity in the views of its members, based on religious, tribal or ethnic ties. An example is "the Mikiri" or women's meeting among the Igbo in Eastern Nigeria, which carried out a series of highly coordinated, violent demonstrations against the British administration in 1929-30. The so-called Aba Riots brought about a set of reforms in the native administration. In Sierra Leone, the Women's initiation societies or "Bundu" have been used by female politicians

to build local power bases and to recruit a ready supply of loyal political workers.

"Aside from influencing policy, women's organizations have provided the same kind of leadership training for women as party activity has. Free from the domination by men which is taken for granted in so many contexts, women in women's organizations can develop the skills, confidence and reputation for leadership necessary for them to exercise real influence in politics." (Ib. p. 28).

### Hopeful Signs

There are still many obstacles that obstruct women's progress toward equal participation in politics. Among them, ignorance and illiteracy form the main handicap which prevents their political emancipation in the third world. Another obstacle is the strongly confirmed stereotype that women are not fit for politics and that they had better keep away from it. This traditional attitude is a source of loss not only to woman's cause but also to the state and to the general public, because the restriction of political power to man alone has been a main cause of continuous warfare which brought misery to the majority of the world's inhabitants.

Encouraging signs, however, continue to appear on the world's horizons. In 1975, the International Women's year brought women's rights to the fore in the consciousness of the literate public. In a 1975 Gallup poll in the United States, 73 per cent of the American voting public said they would vote for a qualified woman for president. In 1931, less than a third said they would do so.

The same Gallup Poll also reported that seven out of ten respondents thought the U.S. would be governed as well or better than it is now if more women held office because women were expected to be more frugal, less corrupt and harder working.

"In Norway, in the last decade, there has been a marked increase in the participation of women in political elites. Representation in local councils increased from 6.3 per cent in 1963 to 15.4 per cent in 1975. Representation in Parliament: from 8 per cent in 1965 to 23.9 per cent in 1977. In 1978 women were in charge of 4 ministries. The greatest gains were made in 1971 when for the first time women elected women in Norwegian municipal elections and in 3 municipalities women won a majority of seats." (WIN, vol. 2, no. 4, Spring 1978)."

Everywhere in the world, the laws of personal status are being questioned or revised. The same is true of traditions that assert woman's inferiority and incompetence for political activity. "As a global trend, rising numbers of women in politics will indicate that human beings are making progress toward a more humane world not because women are necessarily more humane than men, but because any society that categorically excludes half its members from the processes by which it rules itself will be ruled in a way that is less than fully human." (Ib. p. 37)

### Sources:

- 1 — Newland, K. *Women in Politics: A Global Review*, World Watch Paper 3, World Watch Institute, Washington D.C. 1975.
- 2 — WIN, vol 4, no 2, Spring 1978.