

Political Change

Hearing Women's Voices

The presence of women at all levels of decision-making is crucial for the peaceful transition of war-torn societies. A recent United Nations Study on women in politics and decision-making in the late twentieth century outlines five basic reasons why the political participation of women in democracies is essential;

- 1) Women constitute at least half of any population and should be represented proportionally. The recognition of women's rights to full citizenship must be reflected in their effective participation at the various levels of political life. There cannot be true democracy where women are virtually excluded from positions of power.
- 2) Women's under representation can be dangerous for the legitimacy of the democratic system since it distances elected representatives from their electorate and more particularly from the women among their electors. The legitimate value of the outcome of political decision-making is thus not the same for both men and women. This may give rise to public mistrust towards the representative system.
- 3) Political participation involves articulating, providing and defending interests. Women are conditioned to have different social roles, functions and values. It is reasonable to believe that women are more aware of their own needs and are therefore better able to press for them. Women are more aware, for example, of the need to have control over their own bodies and therefore access to family planning; to have proper provision for the care of children and of others who are physically dependent; and to have more protection against sexual violence and harassment.
- 4) There are some indications that women politicians, if there are enough of them, can change the focus of politics. Women are more critical of the traditional definition of politics. An initial effect of women entering the political scene was the enlargement of the scope of politics. Issues, such as child care, sexuality and family planning, that were once confined to the private sphere are now seen as political.
- 5) No country can afford not to utilize all its human resources. Women comprise half the world's pool of potential talent and ability. The importance of their fundamental biological and social roles is clear, and, though their input is often unrecognized, they are major contributors to national economies through their paid and unpaid labour. Excluding women from positions of powers and from elected bodies impoverishes public life and inhibits the development of a just society (summary: United Nations, 1995: XII-XIII).

What is true of older democracies is especially true for fragile democracies trying to establish political systems from the bottom-up; women must be involved. Peace building