

Why Do So Few Women Come to Power?

Senior Researcher Torild Skard, the Author of “Women of Power – Half a Century of Female Presidents and Prime Ministers Worldwide” (Policy Press), Comments on the Recent Elections in the United States.

It was a close race. Actually Hillary Clinton got more votes in the presidential election than her male opponent. But he won due to the system with an electoral college that entails distortions. Thus, white male power in the US was strengthened, and this by a man with extreme sexist and racist attitudes. Women did not make gains in Congress, either. The Republicans got the majority in both chambers and the number of women remained unchanged at a low 19 per cent. This is less than the global average of women in parliament, which constantly is too low, at 23 per cent in 2016.

A woman as head of a superpower like the US would have been a very important breakthrough. Globally the situation for democratic political governance with gender equality is dismal.

In 1945 the nations of the world reaffirmed faith in the equal rights of women and men, and in 1975 they required the elimination of all obstacles in the way of enjoyment by women of equal status with men.

Nevertheless, women still strive to obtain one fourth of the Members in Parliaments worldwide, and in political positions with more power, the figures are even lower. In November 2016 there are not more than 16 women presidents and prime ministers all in all – not even 6 per cent of the total.

When the United Nations was created at the San Francisco conference, there were only 3 per cent women among the representatives. But women, particularly from Latin America, lobbied actively for women's rights. So the UN Charter confirmed the equal rights of women and men and a special Commission for the Status of Women (CSW) was created (*Torild Skard: “Getting Our History Right” and cisd.soas.ac.uk*). Action plans and a convention were adopted, institutions created and measures implemented both nationally and internationally. Gender parity in decision-making was to be achieved by 2000. But it was not.

Why is progress so slow?

Generally around the world, men dominate over women, have higher status, more power and resources. The political elite denies people with lower status their economic, political, social and cultural rights. To maintain their position, those in power use domination techniques (*Berit Ås: "Master suppression techniques"*). They seek to divide and rule, use violence or threaten to use it. They withhold information, conceal realities and confuse concepts. Women who engage in politics, are ridiculed, ignored or co-opted. They experience the double-bind dilemma: damned if you do and damned if you don't.

Notwithstanding, some women have managed to become national leaders, particularly after 1990 and the fall of the Berlin wall. The first was Sirimavo Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka in 1960 and since then there have been one hundred, all in all, on all continents except the Middle East and North Africa.

To rise to the top the women presidents and prime ministers had to have extraordinary qualifications, and they succeeded more often in industrial than developing countries. In addition to higher living standards more countries in the North had democratic political systems. The majority of the women climbed up through the political parties. But globally, the party leadership remains extremely male dominated, with only 10 per cent women. Feminist organizations have to put on pressure to get women in decision-making positions.

Although the female leaders encountered resistance and usually were surrounded by men, most of them supported the CEDAW and promoted various women's issues, such as girls' education, health care services for women, crisis centers etc. So it made a difference that a woman rose to the top instead of a man. But how do we get more women to the top?

The world leaders must walk the talk and implement the goals and strategies of the international agreements: obtain knowledge and analyses of the realities; provide training and conscious-raising of the population; carry out special measures and institutional changes to reduce the inequalities and provide an enabling environment for empowerment of women. Women's rights champions must be driving forces, and men in high positions must take their responsibility to achieve the agreed-upon policies.