The global 50/50 Campaign gains momentum

On the eve of International Women’s Day 2002, the Gender Advocacy Programme in Cape Town organised the launch of the 50/50 by 2005 campaign for South Africa. Our southern neighbour thereby became the 11th country to officially launch the 50/50 campaign for gender balance in government, following Argentina, Trinidad and Tobago, Surinam, Guyana, Bulgaria, Philippines, Indonesia, Croatia, Namibia and Canada.

A closer look at South Africa

A two-day conference and launch were held in Cape Town. The conference deliberated on the “unfinished business” of achieving gender balance at all levels of government. Both events were attended by women members of parliament, provincial governments and mayors from the major political parties.

It was established that the relatively high percentage of women in the National Assembly (30%) and in cabinet was a direct result of the ANC’s gender policy, which includes a quota of at least 30% women in all party structures, on candidate lists and in cabinet appointments.

Other political parties do not yet have similar gender policies. It also emerged that women’s representation is far lower at the provincial level, with only one out of nine provincial premiers being a woman. There are no women in the KwaZulu-Natal cabinet and no government department in this province is headed by a woman.

History of the global campaign

Speaking at the South African launch, Doris Mpolou, Gender and Governance Associate at the New York-based Women’s Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO) provided a brief history of the global 50/50 by 2005 campaign as follows:

“Prior to the national and regional launches, during the June 2000 UN General Assembly special session to review the Beijing Platform of Action in New York, WEDO with its network of partners from around the world launched the global campaign: 50/50 by 2005: Women in Government – Getting the Balance Right! The campaign was launched to concretely address the issue of women’s under-representation in political decision-making.

The campaign demands that governments work towards a provisinal minimum target of 30% women representatives in cabinet ministries and legislatures, as well as in local authorities by 2003 and calls for equal representation by 2005. It emphasises the importance of setting numerical, time-specific targets to ensure that governments translate their words and commitments into action.

Undeniably, women are more active in political arenas worldwide in
the last decade than ever before, but cultural and structural barriers continue to impede progress. This includes difficulties encountered during elections, such as lack of campaign funding and running in a “winner take all” electoral system, which continue to hinder women’s equal representation in political decision-making.

Statistics show that women are gradually making their way into politics, yet the increase is minimal. Women represented 10% of the legislative bodies in 1995 and 12.8% of national parliaments in 1999. Today, women represent almost 14% of parliaments worldwide according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union - a mere annual increase of 0.6%. At this rate and if sustained, it will take some 65 years to get the global gender balance right!

Nowhere in the world has women’s representation in government reached the 50% mark. However, France took a leap forward by adopting the “parity” bill in 2000 to enforce gender equality in politics. When first applied in municipal elections last March, it had an instantaneous effect. The proportion of women municipal councillors in communities of over 3,500 people shot up from 23% to 48%. But the biggest breakthrough will come in 3 months’ time, when the first elections to the National Assembly are held under the new legislation.

One of the most frequently asked questions about the 50/50 campaign is why do we want more women in parliaments and governments? The answer is simple: Parity is our goal and we will not rest until we get there. There are three good reasons why we must work very hard to achieve it:

Firstly, in many countries women constitute at least half of the population and therefore should be represented proportionally. Legitimacy, justice and participatory democracy cannot be achieved if half of the population remains unheard and does not have full access to decision-making and to activities that implement their full rights as citizens - equal to men.

Secondly, the right to political participation is a human right - inherent, indivisible and inalienable, as enshrined in the Convention on Women’s Political Rights and the International Covenant on Cultural and Political Rights. States have a duty and obligation to fulfill and implement the rights of women in politics on equal level with men. As stated in Articles 7 & 8 of CEDAW*, women have a right to vote, hold public office and exercise public functions, including the right to represent their countries at international level.

Thirdly, with regards to the representation of women and societies’ interests, women and men have different approaches to problems and priorities. The call for equal representation seeks to ensure that women’s concerns and perspectives are taken into account in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of policy decision and outcomes. Women in government are expected to carry the women’s agenda forward to generate just and sustainable solutions to gender inequity. Recent studies demonstrate that when represented in critical mass (at least 30%) women’s concerns - such as childcare, women’s health and violence against women - were more visible on the political agenda and more likely to be addressed.

In Sweden for example, where women occupy 42.7% seats in parliaments and nine of the eleven cabinet ministries, issues such as child-care and equal opportunities rights have gained importance. In addition, every ministry, including the Ministry of Finance, is expected to set gender equality objectives and targets within their programmes proposed in the budget bill. Each year, the Ministry of Finance makes a special report on the distribution of economic resources between women and men when tabling the Government Budget Bill.”

The campaign grows in Namibia

During March and April this year, Sister Namibia together with the Namibian Women’s Manifesto Network conducted workshops and marches in support of the 50/50 Bill in Rehoboth, Tses, Keetmanshoop, Omithara, Witveli, Gobabis and Dordabis. In Windhoek we celebrated International Women’s Day in Freedomland Squatter Camp followed by a march to parliament to hand over a petition for the passing of the 50/50 Bill to the Speaker of the National Assembly. The Namibian Women’s Manifesto Network is now waiting for a response from the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Petitions. 9

* Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women