

TO: The Women's Caucus in Nepal
CC: Surya Kiran Gurung, Secretary of the House of Representatives
Yam Kumari Bascota, Parliament Secretariat Staff Member

FROM: Maryam Montague, Representative of The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs

DATE: April 28, 1998

RE: The Objectives and Structure of Women's Caucuses. A Discussion Paper for the Women MPs in Nepal.

Women have typically been excluded from the public sphere on the basis of gender. However, recent years have seen a dramatic increase in the political participation of women in most areas of the world. In legislatures around the world, women have begun to seize the reins of power. As of January 1, 1997, the Scandinavian countries boast the highest percentiles of women parliamentarian with 40.4% in Sweden, 39.4% in Norway, 33.5% in Finland and 33.0% in Denmark. The percentage of women serving in national assemblies in developing countries is also on the rise, with women comprising slightly over 25% of parliamentarians in Argentina, South Africa, and Mozambique. Globally, the average percentage of women legislators is quite low at 11.7%. In Nepal, the percentage of women MPs is even lower -- less than 5%.

Why a Parliamentary Women's Caucus?

For those women who do succeed in entering the political realm, the experience can be a difficult one. In many instances, women MPs are not viewed as equals by their male peers. Without this necessary support, it is difficult for an individual member to affect the policy agenda. However, women are discovering that there exists greater strength in numbers. By joining together in a women's caucus, women not only give one another needed emotional support, but also act as a powerful tool to influence policy and bring issues long overlooked by male counterparts to the fore. A formal women's caucus acts as a symbol of women's collective influence as well as an internal interest group. **Putting aside ideological differences, women from all parties join together in a women's caucus to promote issues of importance to women.**

Caucus Objectives or Goals

Although the degree of structure varies from caucus to caucus, many women's caucuses in other parts of the world typically perform several functions, including:

- **lobbying (pressurizing) for legislation or amendments to existing legislation on issues important to women;**
- **lobbying for the inclusion of issues important to women in the parties;**
- **focusing public attention on women's issues through the skillful use of the media; and**
- **working closely with NGOs interested in the advancement of women.**

In the women's caucus in Malawi (where women MPs make up only 5.60% of the parliament), for example, the women parliamentarians have united around two common goals: 1) to propose amendments that will bring existing laws into full compliance with the rights of women provided for in the constitution; and 2) to ensure that gender is considered in all legislation passed by the parliament. These objectives are further reflected in the groups by-laws.

Secretary Surya Kiran Gurung has assured me of the support of Speaker Ram Chandra Poudel for the formation of a parliamentary women's caucus in Nepal **as long as the objectives of such a caucus are clearly outlined.** There is a concern on the part of the parliament that such a caucus be focused on issues, rather than on foreign trips, etc. If possible, it might be most effective for the caucus to express its broad objectives in a written terms of reference (see below). Secretary Gurung has also advised that the women's caucus will need to develop a minimum budget that details the needs of the women's caucus. For example you may want to have funding for a part-time staff person who will be responsible for preparing minutes and agendas, as well as maintaining records and handling any correspondence.

Structure of a Women's Caucus

To accomplish its objectives, a caucus is organized around a formal structure. Often a document (or terms of reference) is created to state the groups's goals and objectives, as well as to develop a working structure. **(See the example of the terms of reference for the Malawi Women's Caucus.) The caucus is usually presided over by one or two chairwomen, chosen by the women's caucus members, themselves.** In the Massachusetts state legislature in America, the women's caucus is presided over by two chairwomen, one from the lower house and the other from the upper house. In the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues in the US, there are two co-chairs, one from each of the two major political parties in the US, who head the group. **Chairwomen are typically responsible for organizing caucus meetings and serving as the caucus's external spokespersons.** To give more women the opportunity to hold leadership positions within the caucus in Nepal, you might consider the possibility of the chair(s) having a one year tenure. In the Massachusetts women's caucus, the post is held for one year

and rotates alphabetically among the members. You may also want to consider electing a treasurer to maintain a petty cash fund. In some other countries, male members can take part in such a caucus (particularly if it is a Caucus for Women's Issues, rather than a Women's Caucus), although typically they hold observer status. In the US, for example, there have been over one hundred men who belong to the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues. You can decide among yourselves whether including men in the caucus in Nepal is desirable or feasible, given the Nepali context.

In Nepal, by-laws will have to be drafted for the caucus. To assist in this process, I have passed on to Secretary Gurung a copy of the by laws of the counterpart caucus in the US. (See the by-laws for the US Congressional Caucus on Women's Issues.) These by laws are not to be used as a model, but merely give one an idea of the by-laws of one such caucus elsewhere in the world. Secretary Gurung has assured me that he will discuss the drafting of by laws for the caucus in Nepal with the Parliament Secretariat Legal Advisor.

Caucus meetings should be held at a minimum one time per parliamentary session. However, you may want to consider meeting initially more frequently. In the case of Malawi, the caucus meets at minimum once during each parliamentary session. The first meeting is held on the first Wednesday of each parliamentary sitting. Other meetings are subject to the call of the Chair.

Challenges and Possible Solutions for the Women's Caucus

The major challenge faced by caucus members is the need to establish a united group of women, despite differing party affiliations and sometimes divergent views. Unlike other forms of organization, caucus members choose to subordinate their political beliefs in an effort to further women's issues. Women's caucuses can fall victim to internal strife, however. Legislators who are not willing to work for a common agenda by putting aside ideological and personal ambitions could hamper the effectiveness of the organization. To be successful, a caucus must be built on a foundation of equality, cooperation and mutual respect. **Petty squabbles not only damage the reputation of the caucus, but can also undermine the initial goals and objectives of the group.** To help lessen this potential problem in Nepal, it would be helpful for caucus members to decide upon the decision making process for the caucus in Nepal. Democratic majority or consensus are two methods for decision making to consider. Clarity on this matter will help to minimize potential difficulties, such as how to handle controversial issues. However, the caucus will undoubtedly face some tricky issues. For example, in the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues in the US, the caucus has grappled with the sensitive issue of abortion. Because the majority of caucus members are pro-choice, the caucus has decided to align itself with the pro-choice movement. This action, however, has served to isolate some women within the membership and has discouraged others from joining.

Often the caucus must be highly selective of the issues it wants to support. If a caucus does not prioritize issue areas, it risks the possibility of becoming too diffused and may wind up

accomplishing little. In the case of the women's caucus in Nepal, **the caucus should decide on its priority issues**, whether they be rape, women's inheritance, women's quotas, women's economic independence, women's participation in all facets of government, safe motherhood, or other issues of importance to women in Nepal. (See the summary of priority areas for the Malawi women's caucus. These were decided upon by having the women's caucus members fill out a special form. Also see the list of issues that have been supported by the US Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues.) Priority issues should be decided keeping in mind the possibility of the caucus's success in influencing these issues. If the caucus chooses issues that are too controversial or where there is little obvious support in the parliament, particularly early on, there will be a greater chance of possible failure.

Another challenge for a caucus is the lack of available time on the part of members for caucus activities. It is for this reason that the caucus must be particularly organized. Caucus members must commit to attending caucus meetings if at all possible. It might be helpful to **develop a plan of action with a corresponding time frame in order to help keep caucus activities focused and on schedule**. In the case of the women's caucus in Malawi, their first order of business was to examine Malawi's constitution and identify existing laws that adversely affect women. With the assistance of legal counsel, the caucus then developed amendments to change those areas of Malawi law which discriminate against women. The adaptations proposed by the women's caucus tackled a variety of sensitive issues, including inheritance, citizenship, marriage, divorce, and child support where women currently face discrimination. (See the Malawi Women's Caucus recommendations for legal reform on issues concerning women, children and families.) The women in the Malawi women's caucus built their lobbying skills by discussing the proposed amendments in a special workshop to sensitize male MPs as to the importance of these issues. The caucus also attended a skills training workshop with NGOs interested in women's issues to organize an awareness campaign in order to educate the Malawian people about the proposed legal amendments.

The Nepali press has not traditionally placed a great focus on the activities of the women MPs. This may necessitate **a pro-active effort on the part of the caucus to solicit press coverage for caucus activities and goals**. The skillful use of the press will raise awareness about caucus objectives and may increase the likelihood of these objectives being fulfilled. To announce the formation of the women's caucus, you might consider issuing a press release or holding press interviews.

Despite the obstacles involved in creating a successful caucus, many women legislators have used this powerful tool to create change in an area historically dominated by men.

Information about Women's Caucuses elsewhere in the World

I have some additional information about women's caucuses in other countries in my office. I would be happy to provide you with this information, if you so desire. I can be reached at my office at 248-628 or at my residence at 431-610.