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SUBHEADLINE: Although Mother Nature has seen fit to ensure there are just as many women as men, the fairer sex lags far behind in 'man-made' institutions _ but that is changing, as reflected in the summit held in Phitsanulok last week

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Nature is a great equaliser: In a world population of over six billion people, for example, roughly 50 percent are women. According to figures available from the Population Reference Bureau for 1998, there were 2,941,000,000 females in a world population of 5,900,054,000.

But when it comes to small-scale, man-made institutions, this principle of equality is less meticulously applied. Women around the world represent today only about 13.7 percent of parliaments worldwide and 14 percent of heads of states, according to data collected by the Inter-Parliamentary Union. In the Asia-Pacific, women account for about 14.9 percent of national legislatures.

This widespread abnormality is increasingly being addressed and regarded as incompatible with the principle of good governance. Activists and women's rights advocates around the world are working relentlessly to move the situation of women to the forefront of national and international policy debates, trying hard to shake up the six percent annual rate of increase in female representation worldwide _ which, if it persists, would mean that gender balance in government would be reached sometime in the year 2075.

In the wake of momentous conferences such as the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women, the ``Asia-Pacific Summit of Women Mayors and Councillors'', organised by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (Escap) last week in Phitsanulok, tried once again to make a difference and hasten the levelling process.

Over 200 participants from some 24 countries throughout the Asia-Pacific region came together to discuss barriers to women entering politics, in particular at the local level, and to devise solutions.

The local level was identified as the only level where women could enter political life with relative ease, which serves as a good training ground for women wishing to reach higher levels in government.

This emphasis on the role of women in local government was hence the core of the summit.

Describing female leadership as ``more inclusive, collaborative and consultative, more tolerant of different points of view and more people oriented'', the panel reached a definite consensus on women's ability in decision-making government positions to provide ``transformative leadership'' by redefining political priorities, placing new items on the agenda and providing new perspectives on mainstream issues.

``The exciting thing is that even in repressive systems, we see women making a difference, even if only in small ways," commented Jean Drage from the School of Political Science and International Relations, Wellington, New Zealand.

She added: ``Women have a greater sense of social issues and the well-being and welfare of their communities.... They have a commitment to improving the environment within their communities.... They have different priorities and are prepared to spend time on issues that some men find trivial, such as family issues, dowry problems and violence against women and children.

``They focus on change, preferring a more democratic and transparent approach to governance in an effort to move away from the adversarial and, sometimes, corrupt image of politics."

For all these good reasons and more, The Phitsanulok Declaration on the Advancement of Women in Local Government adopted at the end of the four-day summit called for equality in local government and for various measures which could help bring about the ultimate goal of 50-50 representation between women and men in local governments.

Recalling the various global and regional mandates such as The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of the 4th World Conference on Women in 1995, and reaffirming their commitment to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Cedaw), the participants emphasised that ``women's rights are human rights" and that those equal human rights, duties and responsibilities as citizens shared both by men and women should include ``the right to participate equally in the process of governance, including the right to vote, to hold both appointed and elected office and to participate in decision making at all levels of government".

``Women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the betterment of society. Without the active participation of women at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved," notes the resolution.

The long list of significant barriers to representation and participation of women include, among other concerns: entrenched cultural and social norms and practices, attitudinal and structural barriers to economic, social and political resources, reproductive and domestic responsibilities and the unequal division of labour within the household, the domination of men in politics, the high cost of election campaigns, and the harassment and intimidation of women participating in the political process.

Varying from country to country, the strategies and actions required range from time-bound targets, to quotas, electoral reforms _ ``that promote gender balance such as proportional representation incorporating party lists" _ and caps on campaign spending.

These actions are seen as ``necessary to break existing barriers to increased representation and participation of women in local government" and as ``the beginning of vital initiatives", according to Escap's Executive Secretary Kim Hak-Su.

``I firmly believe that without equality between men and women, we cannot be a just or healthy society. We regard the Summit as a milestone on a long journey," commented Kim Hak-Su, hoping the conference would give rise to a cascade of networks, the recommendations and resolutions pouring down to other stratas of society, with the UN Escap holding a pivotal role in the follow-up of the conference.

Well-worded, meticulously prepared and reviewed by the Summit participants, the Phitsanulok Declaration seems to be aimed at helping women join the fray. And surely that is what is needed in a region where, as acknowledged by Kim, women are ``nowhere equally represented in local government".

In Asian-Pacific countries, where representation is not mandated by quotas, women indeed account for some 15 percent of elected local government officials. According to a comparative analysis of 13 countries of the region prepared by Jean Drage, women in the region ``are under-represented in local government" with ``even fewer women in management positions in local government".

``Statistics show the percentage of women in local government seats range from a high of 33 percent to a low of two percent," reads the report.

Diversity was thus another keyword of the summit.

The broad spectrum of participants, ranging from representatives of women-friendly environments such as French Polynesia to the most repressive, Afghanistan _ touched upon by Regional Programme Manager for the UN Habitat Afghanistan Teresa Poppelwell_ and various groups, networks and associations of disabled women, could only testify in favour of these prevailing disparities.

``As representatives from French Polynesia, which is the first territory in the world to have applied the 50-50 parity law _ following the passing of the bill in France concerning the principle of parity in all elections _ we are very honoured to be here," commented Beatrice Vernaudeau, former minister of Solidarity and Family and deputy mayor of the city of Pirae in Tahiti.

``It is our duty to come and share our experience, Tahitian women having benefited from this extraordinary evolution through the status of French Polynesia (an overseas territory within the French Republic)," she said.

``The number of elected women rose from 12 to 45 percent and even reached 49 percent after the government was composed.

``This was an awesome challenge for Tahitian women as some were not fully ready to embrace a political career or were lacking the appropriate vision. Yet until then they always had been up to their responsibilities and men recognised that the country would benefit from their expertise and background," she added.

The crucial training to support women in the process and to ensure quality was also on everyone's lips.

``We need to equip women with the proper information, training and mechanisms to deliver for the good of the people. No doubt they still have to be trained a lot, all the more so in higher levels of government or in law-making bodies, where, for example, they are even fewer," commented Dr Rita B. Joshi, former mayor from Allahabad (UP), India, who along with six other participants (including Premrudee Charmpoonod, mayor of Phitsanulok, the longest serving woman mayor in Thailand) was granted an Escap Award of Recognition for Outstanding Service and Breaking Barriers Against Participation in Local Government.

``The world is opening for women. Thanks to two sets of amendments to the Indian constitution implemented since 1992-1993, the stage has been set, but it is not enough.

``There are still many drawbacks, such as their financial situation or the very patriarchal society," Rita said, bringing out India as a trend-setter for the world in reference to their initiative of reserving 30 percent of seats for women in all decision-making institutions, including district councils (panchayats).

With 33 percent of women in local government seats, India was looked on as one of the best pupils in the region, way ahead of Thailand, where, as acknowledged by the National Commission on Women's Affairs, ``the participation of women at the decision-making level in government and politics is very small compared to men".

Yet with 10.5 percent of female senators in the Upper House and 9.2 percent of female representatives in the Lower House of Parliament, the situation of women in Thailand is progressing.

``Although it still hasn't reached a satisfactory level, the number of women at decision-making levels gradually increased during the last decade," notes a report prepared by the National Commission on Women's Affairs.

No doubt this ascending trend will continue in the future and will benefit greatly from the impetus created by the Summit.

``We have already been working a lot towards creating a strategy for greater female participation at all levels of political life. But the Summit gives us an even greater motivation and emphasis on the importance and the role woman can play," said Prisna Pongtadsirikul, director of the National Commission on Women's Affairs.

She added: ``Although I feel it is impossible for Thailand to comply with the global campaign (launched in New York in June 2000 by the Women's Environment and Development Organisation) calling for 50-50 gender balance representation by 2005, we are going to come up with a proposal that there should be at least 33 percent of women in every committee in order to reach a critical minority."

Khunying Supatra Masdit, of the Democrat Party, also had a clear platform in mind: push for direct elections, perhaps a quota system, and emphasise the local level.

``The grassroots level is the solution. If each village could already have one leader of each sex, that would already be a good starting point. More than relying on the passing of new bills, or on international bodies, we need to train women at the local level _ higher levels would follow."

``This is actually a sensitive issue. The situation won't change overnight but it will, little by little, by means of formal and informal ways. We are already moving towards the right direction but we all need to move together _ that is, women in politics, women outside [politics] and men," said Pusadee Thamthai, member of the National Council on Women's Affairs.