

# Playing Political Catch-Up with the Rest of the World

**Kavita N. Ramdas**

March 2008, Women's History Month has taken on dramatic new relevance for the women of the United States.

For the first time in U.S. history, a woman, Senator Hillary Clinton, is being taken seriously as candidate for president. After a long and still uphill struggle within the Democratic Party, including crushing defeats in 11 primaries in February, Hillary Clinton's campaign advanced with big victories in Ohio and Texas.

While the math still favors Senator Obama, no one today can predict the outcome of this closely contested primary season—this November, the U.S. may well have its first ever presidential campaign in which a woman is at the top of the ticket.

If that is indeed the case, however, the United States will not be a pioneer in women's political rights — instead, it will be playing catch up with the rest of the world. While we ponder the implications of our first female commander-in-chief, for many countries it is a milestone long passed.

New Zealand, the first nation to give women the right to vote in 1893, is led by Helen Clark, the second female Prime Minister in a country where women make up more than 50% of the cabinet. India's current President, Pratibha

Devisingh Patil, is a woman, as is the head of the majority Congress party, Sonia Gandhi. Sri Lanka, its small island neighbor, blazed the trail almost half a century earlier, when it elected Srimavo Bandaranaike, the first woman to serve as Prime Minister of any nation. She served three terms in that capacity.

Khalida Zia led Bangladesh from 1991 to 1996, and Benazir Bhutto seemed likely to serve a third term as Prime Minister in Pakistan until her assassination this December. In Haiti, Claudette Werleigh served for a brief period in the 1990s; while the Philippines had Corazon Aquino, Ireland Mary Robinson, and the UK Margaret Thatcher.

We should also mention Golda Meir in Israel, Gro Harlem Brundtland in Norway, Tarja Halonen in Finland, and Evita Peron in Argentina — let alone a new generation of women leaders, such as Liberia's Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Germany's Angela Merkel, and Chile's Michelle Bachelet, who are leading nations on three different continents into the 21st century. But in the country of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Alice Paul, Harriet Tubman and Angela Davis, there has never been a woman head of state.

Senator Clinton's policies, recent campaign tactics, and her leadership style will affect deci-



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sions by U.S. voters. Yet, for U.S. women who have struggled for equality for so long, there is no doubt about the significance of finally being able to choose a woman to lead the nation.

As someone who grew up in India, a country full of contradictions about the role of women, I know this much: women in visible positions of leadership matter. They matter because their very presence at decision-making tables challenges long-held assumptions about the competence, ability and skills of the majority of the world's population. They create an environment in which young girls believe it is possible to be the next Indra Gandhi and young men lose a sense of automatic entitlement to lead; opening the planet to be able

to call upon a far more abundant and diverse wealth of human resources. Of course, having a woman head of state is no guarantee that women's rights and lives will immediately improve. Over time, however, the presence of women in leadership has subtle but demonstrable impacts in easing the discrimination, violence and poverty that mark so many women's lives.

Those are the realities faced by thousands of grassroots women's rights advocates whose efforts far from the public eye are making a profound impact on the quality of lives worldwide. They are taking on big business and preserving the environment from eastern China to Uzbekistan, and the Niger Delta — and often overcoming extraordinary odds to do so. An obituary in the *New York Times* some months ago honored Kinkri Devi, an illiterate untouchable woman, who successfully challenged illegal mining in the Himalayas. I remember her from the 1995 UN conference in Beijing, where her efforts were recognized by then first lady, Hillary Clinton. Women are combating trafficking and sexual exploitation in Cambodia, where Mu Sochua, a human rights activist is now the first ever woman Secretary General of a Cambodian political party.

They are making peace where men have failed: Leymah, from Liberia, and Saran, of Sierra Leone, mobilized thousands of women to participate in peace talks to end their country's civil wars, forcing both government forces and rebels to the negotiating tables. And they are creating profound social change, such as the ordinary mothers and daughters active in Mexico City's successful move-

ment to legalize abortion, a first in this Catholic nation. It was these women's organizations that rallied and voted for Sirleaf-Johnson in Liberia, for Bachelet in Chile, and Kirchner in Argentina; and who dismissed the notion that Sonia Gandhi was a "foreigner" in India.

This transformation driven by women is, in fact, the result of a much less visible, a multi-decade process of women organizing for change and for their rights at the most grassroots level of villages, barrios, favelas, and urban slums — all this is indeed the astonishing result of what we refer to as "the women's movement." Many of the women who strongly support Hillary's campaign are the women who lived through the U.S. movement's heyday of the '60s and '70s. They feel intensely that her campaign and potential success, would be a fitting vindication of a women's movement that has never quite received the recognition it deserves as a key contributor to the evolution of this nation.

In contrast, women leaders in the third world have often succeeded in gaining support of large majorities of their citizens, both men and women, because their leadership emerged not only out of local women's movements, but in the context of broader political struggles. Thus, Bhutto forged her political skills and ideology in a long fought democratic resistance to a military dictator, General Zia. Michele Bachelet knew what it meant to be a refugee and victim of a military coup d'etat. Ellen Sirleaf Johnson was a survivor of a devastating civil war. Rwanda, where women now comprise 48 percent of the legislature, has had to overcome a genocide, while in

Afghanistan Habiba Sarabi, the first minister for women's affairs, was a teacher in a refugee camp in Pakistan before she became a political leader. In Burma, democratically elected Aung San Su Kyi has lived for years under military house arrest.

While Senator Clinton's political identity was not forged in that same context — (no American leader since the Revolution has had to sacrifice what many leaders of the developing world have had to sacrifice simply in order to be elected) — were she to become president she would face the age old conflict that women leaders world wide have faced.

Will Clinton find the strength needed to defy the conventional norm that forbids a woman leader who wants to be taken seriously from speaking about, much less addressing issues of gender inequality? Will she heed the words of Benazir Bhutto, who, at a Council on Foreign Relations event shortly before her assassination, expressed regret for believing that she had to lead as a man and for not investing enough in key issues that deeply affect women's lives — health and education.

If the U.S. is playing catch up with other nations in terms of electing a woman leader, I for one, hope sincerely that she takes full advantage of coming later, so that she can learn from her predecessors' mistakes and truly make history. ■

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