

**Reserved Women:  
The Implementation and Efficacy  
of a Reserved Seat Quota for  
Women in the Tibetan Parliament  
in Exile**

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## **Abstract**

By studying a specific example of a system which requires women to be part of the government, policy makers can better understand how to use tools such as a quota to improve the lives of women. I researched whether and how women gain political agency through the quota system implemented by the Tibetan government in exile. I used in-depth interviews from both parliamentary members and those affected by the decisions made by the Tibetan Government in exile to discover the social climate surrounding the quota system. I gained an understanding of how the condition of women's lives has changed as their community has dispersed and how these changes have resulted in political change. An in depth study of the quota system in the Tibetan government in exile revealed what more needs to be accomplished to continue to improve the lives of women and increase equality between men and women all over the world.

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## **Introduction**

*“The non-violent nature of the Tibetan struggle lends itself in perfect harmony with the very nature of women: That of compassion, planning, attention to detail, patience, determination and perseverance.”*

*-Penpa Tsering, Speaker of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile  
from a statement on the 50 Years of Tibetan  
Women’s Struggle, March 4<sup>th</sup> 2009*

While “the very nature of women” lends itself to the Tibetan national struggle, does the very nature of Tibetan women hinder their ability to be part of the Tibetan Government in exile? Social constructs, which include gender roles and rules, are deeply ingrained in the Tibetan community in exile, as they are in all communities in the world. Political tools have been implemented in many countries to overcome social prejudices to create more equal democracies. The Tibetan Parliament in exile which employs a gender quota provides a case study of one of these trends in action. In many countries gender quotas prove to be very controversial as they bring into question the nature of undiscriminating democracies. By exploring the nature of Tibetan women in exile and opinions surrounding the reserved seats for women, it becomes clear how truly essential the quota system is for including the voices of women in the Tibetan Parliament in exile.

## **Methodology**

I conducted my research in Dharamsala, India where the Tibetan Government in exile is located. While parliament was not in session, my proximity to a large community of Tibetans along with governmental offices

proved to be a valuable resource. Interviews were essential for the main body of my research. By speaking with local Tibetan women and community activists, I gained an understanding of the perception of women's issues within the community, discrimination and the quota system which requires women to be part of the government. While gaining the perspective of voters, I also was able to interview three members of the Tibetan Parliament in exile. I examined everyone's opinions on the quota system along with exploring how politically active people considered themselves to be and how informed they were about their government. My interviews were not limited solely to women, due to the fact that men are also affected by the quota system.

I encountered difficulty when trying to approach people with the topic of politics. Tenzin Youdon encouraged me not to request interviews using the word politics because most people shy away from the subject in the Tibetan community. As in many other places politics is perceived as being dirty, therefore many people hesitate to admit interest or involvement (Choedon 4/13/09, Choying 4/22/09). One example of this occurred when I asked Jampa Choedon for an interview and she was hesitant to talk about women and politics because she believed she would not be helpful. She agreed though, and through the interview I discovered that she was president of the regional TWA and was twice nominated for the Assembly and from a western perspective was clearly politically involved. I learned to breach political topics slowly and generally avoided the term when possible.

One of the most helpful resources was a TWA publication with the results from a survey in 2003. This provided a range of data on many of the same questions I asked in interviews. The survey represents the answers of 3,076 Tibetan women in exile in India, many of whom are TWA members. I reference this survey throughout the paper to form a broad base of information and opinions.

A combination of observation of women's lives and their participation in politics, close reading of local publications and in depth interviews with MPs and community members provided an illustration of one case study of a quota system in an abnormal situation, a government in exile.

### **Limitations**

My study only represents the opinions of a small sample of women in the community of Dharamsala. To truly understand the many factors involved with women and politics a larger range of both Tibetan men and women from different settlements would need to be interviewed about their perspectives on gender. A greater perspective could also be gained by using in-depth interviews to analyze the stories of the current female Parliament Members. By understanding their stories it would be easier to pin-point what in the society is working to empower women. Overall, close observation of how the gender dynamics in the Tibetan community are changing over an extended period of time would better reveal the efficacy of the quota system.

## **History of Reserved Seat Quota Systems and the Theoretical Frameworks**

Currently, more than one hundred countries make use of some type of quota systems to ensure the involvement of women within the government (Krook 1). As described by Drude Dahlerup and Lenita Freidenvall in their article “Quotas as a ‘Fast Track’ to Equal Political Representation for Women”, four arguments lie behind the push towards increased participation by women. The first is known as the justice argument; women make up half of the population and therefore have the right to half the seats. The second argument is based on experience. Women have different experiences, whether they are biologically or socially constructed, and should enter into politics because they will approach issues differently. The third argument lies in the idea that men and women might have conflicting interests and therefore men can not represent women, this is known as the interest group argument. Finally, women politicians represent role models for other women in a society and gender quotas bring women into positions of power to guarantee that they are not left out of political life (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 4).

Quota systems can be divided into three variations; party quotas, legislative quotas, and reserved seats. Party quotas are voluntary measures taken by political parties which require that a certain percentage of their candidates be female. Legislative quotas require that a percentage of the candidates running for parliamentary positions are women, ignoring party divisions. These first two systems provide women with more opportunities to be part of the parliament but do not guarantee that all or any of these women will make it into parliament. The



third type, reserved seats, guarantee that some percentage of women will be elected. This measure makes it compulsory for women to be part of a country's legislature. Currently most quota systems aim at maintaining a critical minority of between twenty and thirty per cent women in parliament. Recently there has been a shift in paradigm for examining how women's issues are addressed in legislative bodies from critical mass to critical actors, which are defined as those who "who act individually or collectively to bring about women-friendly policy change," (Childs and Krook 3).

Quotas have proved to be controversial, especially in highly functioning democracies. The systems conflict with the idea of total equality because men and women are not provided with equal chances (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 6). Countries which employ quotas often view it as a type of affirmative action to compensate for the inequalities and injustices of the past, "quotas are not regarded as discrimination of men, but as compensation for structural barriers that women face in the electoral process" (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 6). A quota is just one measure to be taken to increase the political agency of women in a society. As Dahlerup and Freidenvall point out, "quota systems do not remove all obstacles for women in politics, such as women's double burden [the responsibility of balancing a family and a work life], the gender imbalance of financial means for campaigning, the many obstacles women meet when executing assignments as elected politicians, and quotas may even contribute to the stigmatization of women politicians" (Dahlerup and Freidenvall, 8). While exploring the efficacy of

the quota system in the Tibetan parliament I will also touch upon these other obstacles which women might face in the political sphere.

I came into this project expecting to explore whether women's issues are addressed by a critical mass or critical actors in the Tibetan Parliament. As will become clear in this paper, this framework is inadequate in the Tibetan situation due to the fact that the Parliament does not address women's issues (if they exist) and is almost solely focused on the Tibetan national cause. Instead, I chose to focus on public opinion of the quota system and an exploration of whether it is an important measure for including and representing women in political decisions.

### **History of the Tibetan Parliament**

Before the Chinese invasion in 1949 Tibet's government could have been considered a theocracy with His Holiness the Dalai Lama as both the religious and temporal leader of the country. There are no recorded cases of women in Tibet's government pre-invasion, except for a few cases of women becoming chieftans, only because of the absence of an appropriate male leader (Butler 17). Author Tsering Noerom Thonsur claimed that the lack of women was due to tradition and should not be thought of as discrimination (Thonsur 324). Scholars on gender might reject this claim though, just because certain roles have become so ingrained into a society does not mean that they are not forms of discrimination. Tibetan discourses describe how women traditionally held a high status, especially compared to other women in Asia (Butler 13). The Chinese refute this claim and represent Tibetan women as being historically exploited as a

result of Tibetan feudalism and monasticism (Butler 13). This acted as one of the platforms for justifying the invasion of Tibet. While it is known that women were not a part of government decisions before 1949 it is more difficult to determine the existence and amount of gender discrimination of this time period. Women who might of have memories from this time would have been young girls, maybe too young to perceive gender inequalities.

While His Holiness the Dalai Lama had begun to consider the benefits of a democratic government before the Chinese invasion these thoughts were not put into action until after he went into exile. In 1960 at Bodh Gaya His Holiness the Dalai Lama encouraged Tibetans in exile to create a democratic government for themselves. He suggested three representatives for each of the three traditional regions in Tibet and one for each of the Four Buddhist traditions. The first parliament, then known as the Commission of Tibetan People's Deputies (CTPD) took office on September 2, 1960. No women were elected to the first CTPD. One explanation for this fact could be that the first elections were fairly unorganized and very uncompetitive. Most of the thirteen deputies were men who had already held positions of power within the Tibetan community as they went into exile.

The second through seventh CTPD reserved one seat for a woman from each of the three traditional regions in Tibet. It is unclear who established act but in 1974 the reservation was eliminated because women felt that their election to the Parliament should be based on merit not gender (The Status of Exiled Tibetan Women in India 49). This caused the complete absence of female deputies from 1982 to 1990.

In 1990 it was decided that a Constitution for the community was inappropriate due to the exiled status of Tibetans. The government decided to push the constitution aside until Tibet is free and began to draft the Charter of Tibetans in Exile (Choephel 4/20/09). The drafting committee suggested the current quota system and the majority of people supported it. As written in Article 37 of the Charter for Tibetans in Exile each province would now have two reserved spots for women, resulting in a total of six reserved seats for women (The Status of Exiled Tibetan Women in India 49).

Author, Alex Butler believes that “although the Tibetan community in exile is very small, it has created a government structure compatible in breadth and complexity to most national governments” (Butler 20). He continues on to say that the democratic transition has been slower than expected because people are hesitant to remove power from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He stresses the importance of a legitimate democracy and personal responsibility for choosing representatives unbiased of gender, provincial and individual animosity (Tsomo 159). The Dalai Lama is one of the largest advocates of democracy though, maybe one of the only world leaders in history to remove his own temporal power in favor of democracy. It is now up to the Tibetans in exile to fulfill their duties within the democracy to be informed about their representatives and to vote.

## **Women's Issues in the Tibetan Community**

### **Gender Discrimination**

To understand women's role in government we must first understand their role in society. As a platform for my research I wanted to gain a strong understanding of the gender relations within the Tibetan community in exile. As revealed in the Tibetan Women Association's (TWA) survey from 2003 the community is split on the issue of gender discrimination with 55.1% believing there is not gender discrimination within the community and 44.9% believing that there is (The Status of Exiled Women in India 48). There were fewer responses to this question though, than responses to other questions. The analysts believed this might be because women did not fully understand the question or are unsure with what the term gender discrimination could include. Another option may be that gender discrimination is not an issue in the Tibetan community, or they might not recognize it as such due to a lack of awareness on this issue (The Status of Exiled Women in India 48). Another source cites a TWA survey from 1995 which stated that 22% of women said that there was discrimination between men and women, (Butler 76). Butler also pointed out that younger women were more likely to perceive discrimination. It seems unlikely that the amount of discrimination increased between 1995 and 2003, the time that these two surveys were taken. What it reveals is an increased awareness or understanding about gender inequities over this time period.

The TWA recently held an essay competition called the Wisdom of Women's Words, the winning essays were printed in Dolma, the TWAs

magazine. The topic was to respond to the statement of the Kashag issued on the forty-eighth anniversary of Tibetan Democracy Day which mentioned that “since ancient times until now, no gender discrimination of any kind has taken place in our society” (Dolma 33). The majority of the contest winners expressively argued against this claim. The authors supported their arguments with examples such as marriage rights in historical Tibet and traditional gender roles which confined women to the household. A few women also reference the Tibetan word for woman, “skye dman” which literally means low birth. These essays showed a stark contrast to the opinions I gathered through interviews.

Most women I interviewed seemed to agree with the author Tsering Noreom Thonsur, “Tibetan women have not been subjected to inequalities and do not spend their energy struggling for equality within their society” (Thonsur 334). Five of the women I interviewed including a female Member of Parliament all agreed that there is no discrimination between men and women in the society (P.Youdon 4/14/09, Phentok 4/22/09, Choedon 4/13/09, Yangden 4/25/09, Lhamo 4/20/09). Jampa Choedon does not think there are women’s issues within the community. She did explain that when she was younger her parents felt that since she was a girl she did not need to push too hard for education because “not everyone is Indira Gandhi” (Choedon 4/13/09). She emphasized that this has changed and she encourages her daughters to work hard and do well in school so they can go as far as possible (Choedon 4/13/09). The description of this change was echoed in many interviews, how even if in the past women’s issues might

have existed, the society is currently moving away from them and towards equality.

Others I interviewed did believe that gender discrimination and bias exists within the Tibetan community in exile. Interestingly all these people were moderately younger than the women who believed there was no discrimination. This might point to younger people being more educated on gender issues resulting in increased perceptiveness of such issues in the community. Lobsang Wangyal, founder of the Miss Tibet competition, acknowledged that many people say that men and women are equal but believes that always in the back of men's minds is the idea that they deserve more power than women (Lobsang 4/18/09). Tenzin Youdon also noticed this phenomenon of people claiming total equality between men and women in the community but insisted that in reality there are still inequalities (T. Youdon 4/14/09). She also said that in the backs of men's minds is the idea that women should be good cooks and good in the home. Tenzin gave the example that if some of her male friends found out she is not a good cook, she would be teased for it (T. Youdon 4/14/09). Palkyi, a research officer for the Tibetan Women's Association, described how women are lagging behind, as they are in many countries, because of social conditioning they experience from a very young age. She said that females are more comfortable being indoors and men are more comfortable taking risks (Palkyi 4/29/09). Even though many people claim equality she said there is an unstated pressure for women to hold themselves back from public attention. These remarks reveal how gender

discrimination might not be institutionalized but instead form silent expectations within the social system of the Tibetan people.

Palkyi and Tenzin might be better able to perceive discrimination because of their experiences with other cultures, specifically the United States. Palkyi attended college for five years in the U.S. and said that by being a part of two different communities she could compare the differences between them. For example, people are encouraged to speak their minds more in America and people are more respected for being yes men or yes women in the Tibetan community (Palkyi 4/29/09). Tenzin also has experience working closely with American students which might have broadened her perspective. Age seems to also be a factor. Younger women might be receiving a better education on the existence of gender stereotypes than the women in their mothers' generation did.

Another influence on the issue may be women's perception of the situation of local Indian women. Comparatively, Tibetan women seem to have a much higher social status among Tibetan men than Indian women have among their counterparts. This dynamic can be seen in most of the local shops in Dharamsala. Many Tibetan women can be seen working at or even running their own businesses while local Indian women are rarely seen in public by themselves or behind the counter at a business. Tenzin Choying, President of the India Chapter of the NGO Students for a Free Tibet (SFT), thinks the Tibetan culture might be rubbing off on the local Indian culture (Choying 4/22/09). This interaction might also be influencing Tibetans' understanding of discrimination



because comparatively women are more equal among Tibetans, thus blinding people of the more subtle bias' which might exist within the community.

### **The Tibetan Women's Association**

Another way to explore the status of women in the Tibetan community is looking at their role in civil society, specifically non-governmental organizations or NGOs. Palkyi said that while there are a few very politically active women in the community most of the NGOs are still headed by men and that men tend to be more politically active than women (Palkyi 4/29/09). Alex Butler, author of Feminism, Nationalism and Exiled Tibetan Women, describes how the central leadership of the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), one of the largest NGOs in the Tibetan community has been overwhelmingly male (Butler 25). While the four other top NGOs are headed by men, the Tibetan Women's Association has over 15,000 female members (Breaking the Shackles 5). Membership of the TWA tends to be older than the overall female population (The Status of Exiled Tibetan Women in India 15). While many women claim to be involved with the TWA this involvement can range from participating in a candlelight vigil to being on the executive committee of the organization. Pema Youdon described how more women are politically active now and many are part of the regional branches of the TWA (P. Youdon 4/14/09).

The TWA is trying to address discrimination and the lack of awareness about it by holding women leadership training every year for about twenty five women. Palkyi is the woman behind organizing these programs. Part of this training includes a gender sensitization conference which encourages women to

get out of the mindset that women are behind because they are inadequate (Palkyi 4/29/09). The program teaches that gender inequality lies in external factors and is not an intrinsic short-coming (Palkyi 4/29/09). While this training addresses the gender issue, it only reaches twenty five women a year and even Palkyi admits that more needs to be done for the empowerment of women.

One of the aims of the TWA is the political empowerment of women as shown in Palkyi's efforts with the programs for young Tibetan women. Through the 2003 surveys the TWA learned where most women stand on the role of the TWA. Advocating and promoting women's rights and issues was listed last out of five concerns where the resources of the TWA should be allocated, nationalism proved to be the primary concern (The Status of Exiled Tibetan Women in India 43). Alex Butler states that the goal of the TWA is to regain the independence of Tibet (Butler 53). The empowerment of Tibetan women and the national struggle are two of the main focuses of the TWA and they need to be balanced. Most of the work visible to the public has to do with the national struggle and not gender issues. The rallies and petitions held by the TWA are open to everyone but the gender sensitization workshops are only open to a small number of women. Palkyi is working on improving and increasing the number of leadership workshops to increase awareness of gender discrimination in the community (Palkyi 4/29/09).

### **Education**

Gender education begins in the home; children observe how their mother and father interact and what roles they fulfill for the family. Once children

become old enough to attend school, their gender education continues there. In the Tibetan community the role of the school is accentuated since many children attend Tibetan boarding schools and are away from their family for ten months of the year. Everyone I interviewed believed that boys and girls have equal opportunities in education. After coming into exile one of the primary projects of His Holiness the Dalai Lama was to set up a Tibetan education system for the younger generation coming into exile (Butler 67). By evening the opportunities in education for men and women, His Holiness set a standard for equality between men and women in the community. With equal educational backgrounds women are more able to compete with men in the public sphere.

While the opportunity to attend school is equal, other factors affect the students. One example is the story of Pema Youdon, who after six years of education left to get married and start a family (P. Youdon 4/14/09). Also, previously mentioned was Jampa Choedon who was not encouraged to push hard in school because of her gender (Choedon 4/13/09). Familial pressure seems to be changing as both Jampa and Sonam Yangden expressed how they encourage their daughters to work extremely hard in school (Choedon 4/13/09, Yangden 4/25/09). What is harder to establish is the gender relations which exist within the schools. Palkyi explained how men teach the majority of the higher level classes in the Tibetan School (Palkyi 4/29/09). This imbalance probably affects girls' perceptions of the capabilities of women compared to men, which in turn lessens their confidence.

Parliamentarian Dolkar Lhamo, expressed how education is equal between boys and girls but gave the example that if one went into a school and approached a group of boys they would be willing to talk but a group of girls would shy away (Lhamo 4/20/09). Within schools girls are less likely to speak out than boys. Whether this tendency is brought to school from home or fostered within the school system is unclear and would be an interesting avenue to pursue further.

Education was one of the most important qualities people described when choosing members of parliament. For a candidate to be considered qualified they would need to have a high level of education. Since women have equal access to education it seems they should have more access to seats in parliament, which is what I will explore in the next sections.

## **Competition and Campaigning**

### **Un-expecting Candidates**

To become a member of parliament, a person must first be nominated by the community. A list of approximately twenty candidates for each region is created, composed of the people with the most nominations. At this point the nominees can choose to withdraw their name. After a final list is put together then people vote for the ten candidates they believe will best fill the position of parliamentarian. As MP Karma Cheophel states, “We don’t have ready made candidates in the Tibetan community” (Choephel 4/20/09). Alex Butler claims that “people who have some formal education are likely to find themselves pressed into membership of a number of committees in addition to their

employment and family” (Butler 25). Often times the candidates are widely known or highly respected members of the Tibetan communities and might not have any ambitions of being a member of parliament.

One example of an un-expecting nominee is Jampa Choedon. She has twice been nominated in the preliminary elections for the Amdo region but has declined the nomination both times. When asked why she turned down the nomination, she claimed that she was too much of a “dormouse” to act as a public feature (Choedon 4/13/09). Jampa explained that speaking in public makes her blush and that she is too shy to act as a Member of Parliament (Choedon 4/13/09). Jampa is well known in the community, primarily because of her husband’s endeavors. She supported him in his work as welfare officer and put in a helping hand when she needed to. She has also taken over management of the glass bead business started by her husband. Recognition for her hard work in these projects gained her enough recognition to be nominated. This example provides an insight on one avenue to become a politically active woman. While Jampa was known as a hard worker it seems as if she would not have been as publicly active as she is if it were not for her husbands projects. Historically women have gained access to the public sphere through their husbands and it seems like this still might be happening to some degree in the Tibetan community.

Another example is of Youdon Aukatsang, who is currently a Member of Parliament. She described how she was always interested in being involved with Tibetan Politics. She became active with the Regional Tibetan Youth Congress when she was in college and then continued involvement in the community by

becoming a research associate for the TWA. In her own words, “my name appeared for elections for the first time when I was with the TWA in 1996” (Aukatsang 4/5/09). Her story shows how if people want to become involved they do so through NGOs which consequently draws more public attention. This attention leads to one’s name “appearing” on the list of nominations and possibly elected, instead of openly seeking an elected government position.

### **Campaigning**

In the United States a long season of campaigning to gain support typically follows nominations. In the Tibetan community in exile it was almost unheard of candidates campaigning until recently (Choephel 4/20/09, Choedon 4/13/09). Currently campaigns take two main forms. The primary way a candidate spreads information about themselves is through connections with family and friends. Most people I interviewed informed me that they learn about candidates by speaking with colleagues and friends. The other way candidates spread information about themselves is through postings or flyers which feature a picture and a resume type description (Choephel 4/20/09). Youdon Aukatsang explained how in the 2006 election she and some like minded candidates made posters with photos and profiles to be distributed to the Tibetan Settlements (Aukatsang 4/5/09).

Tsering Tsomo, who describes the Tibetan Parliament in an article, claimed that political participation is increasing and that the amount of active campaigning is also increasing (Tsomo 162). Active campaigning in the community is primarily conducted through existing social networks. Dolkar

Lhamo explained that in a small community like the Tibetans in exile it is not necessary for a democracy to have open competition between the candidates (Lhamo 4/20/09). She compared it to the United States which is so large that nominees must publicly announce what they stand for and push to be elected, while in the Tibetan community most nominees are already well-known just (Lhamo 4/20/09). She emphasized that this lack of campaigning did not make their government any less of a democracy because in a democracy it is the responsibility of citizens to be informed about the candidates (Lhamo 4/20/09).

While the small size of the population in exile is one explanation for the lack of campaigning there seems to be a more social reason for the absence of this practice. As Alex Butler explains it, campaigning is “an act of great shamelessness,” which to Tibetans is a “clear indication that that he [the candidate] is not out for the common good (Butler 99). He also goes on to say that open ambition is frowned upon (Butler 101). Pema Youdon explained how in Tibetan culture it is not appropriate “to show out” (P. Youdon 4/14/09). You can see this tendency in all aspects of their lives. Lobsang Wangyal explained that, “Tibetan culture is really about compassion for others so when someone runs for a political office it looks like they’re doing something for their own good, which is not the Tibetan way” (Wangyal 4/18/09).

Everyone I interviewed insisted that in Tibetan culture it is normal to be modest and shy, and this tendency stands in the way of campaigning. While this pressure to be modest applies to both men and women to some extent, the tendency has a stronger hold on Tibetan women. Tsering Noreom Thonsur

believes that “if women are talented and excel in society, their talents are recognized by the public, they often seek election to the Assembly as members or even as cabinet ministers” (Thonsur 332). Most of the women I talked to said they would not consider running for public office because they are too shy. Even Dolkar Lhamo explained how she did not seek out the seat in the Parliament but since people wanted her to take a public position she could not say no because she feels like it is an opportunity to serve her community (Lhamo 4/20/09).

### **TWA elections as an example**

“When things are thrown upon you, you do what is required of you,” explained Jampa Choedon when she was elected to the TWA (Choedon 4/13/09). She did not particularly want to hold a position in the organization or feel like she had sufficient time because of other responsibilities. In Feminism, Nationalism and Exiled Tibetan Women, Butler describes the scene of an election taking place for the TWA. After women had been nominated for the executive positions, each woman stood up during her time to speak and explained why she could not hold the position (Butler 99). Often these explanations focus on other responsibilities such as family and work or a feeling of being unqualified because of lack of education. People, especially women accept leadership positions reluctantly because of how such an action would reflect on them. It is inappropriate to be ambitious. Butler explains how women reported that they “had only accepted leadership positions in the TWA because of pressure from older female relatives or members of their local communities” (Butler 100). Women feel more comfortable just participating in activities which might include protests or



candlelight vigils rather than taking leadership positions. Pema Youdon revealed how she used to be more active in the TWA than she is now because she no longer has time to participate (P. Youdon 4/14/09). Living in exile has provided women with more educational opportunities and increased their participation in the public sphere, both in careers and NGOs. Along with these opportunities though, comes a challenge to balance these responsibilities with the traditional roles of being a woman, which might partly explain the lack of female representation in the Parliament.

## **Reserved Seats and Participation**

### **Top Down Implementation**

The Tibetan government in exile is a rare case of democracy not being an outcome of pressure from the people but instead was planned and pursued by the head of state (Tsomo 165). The reserved seat quota system was also implemented on from the top down instead of being worked for by women at a grass roots level. Tenzin Youdon believes that having women in the government works because the movement is coming from the top down (T. Youdon 4/14/09). When people see things coming from the government they know it is coming from His Holiness the Dalai Lama which means the decisions are highly respected (T. Youdon 4/14/09). Tenzin gave the example of His Holiness requesting a female physician and how this influences the rest of the society because it shows that he believes women are just as capable as men (T. Youdon 4/14/09). People are more likely to support a movement if His Holiness supports it himself, which partly

explains why people are so accepting of the quota system, yet still there is a lack of women stepping into the public light to compete for seats in the Parliament in exile.

### **Opinions**

It is speculated that women make up at least half of the positions in the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), (Choedon 4/13/09). Yet women only make up around 23 per cent of the Tibetan Parliament in exile, which is on the border line of the critical mass deemed as necessary for change by most scholars of quota systems. At the core of each of my interviews was the question of whether the interviewee believed the reserved seat quota system for women was necessary for the Parliament and why?

Tenzin Youdon believes that women have equal access to being part of the parliament but also believes that the quota system is necessary to encourage women to take part in the Parliament “Seats should be reserved because if women know there are seats they will step up to fill them,” she explained, “if seats weren’t reserved there wouldn’t be encouragement for women and there wouldn’t be any female MPs” (T. Youdon 4/14/09).

Jampa Choedon feels that there are many capable and qualified women who would make good parliamentarians but believes that enough women are stepping up, which makes the quota system unnecessary (Choedon 4/13/09).

Pema Youdon thinks the quota system is good in general, for encouraging women, but she expressed how she would rather see seats filled by qualified representatives rather than just being for women (P. Youdon 4/14/09).

Lobsang Wangyal believes that seat reservation is a good step to increase the number of women in parliament. Lobsang explained how he votes for 5 men and 5 women every time because he believes that the representation should be balanced (Wangyal 4/18/09).

Karma Choephel explained both sides of the argument surrounding quotas. Women are more modest than men and do not step up as easily as men and therefore need a quota system to encourage them. He also explained how some women believe that reserved seats make women look weak, like they need help to get the seats. Personally he believes that it is a necessary but temporary step in development to encourage women (Choephel 4/20/09).

Dolkar Lhamo agreed that to “develop a country, girls must take part”. Her reasoning behind this claim was the fact that women make up half of the population and therefore deserve more equal representation in the Parliament. She insisted that reserved seats are necessary, since there are opportunities for women they will be compelled to take seats. Dolkar Lhamo expressed how difficult it is to be a woman and to come out into public light. She believes it should be a permanent reservation to continue to compel women to be part of the government even though the younger generation might believe that seat reservation is not necessary (Dolkar Lhamo 4/20/09).

Tenzin Choying believes that reserved seats are a good idea because women have traditionally been left behind and politics have become male dominated (Choying 4/22/09).

Sonam Yangden feels that women have the same ability to be apart of the government but not the same willingness for two reasons, because they are shy and because they have other responsibilities. She believes it is necessary to reserve seats because it encourages women to step up (Yangden 4/25/09)

Palkyi explained that while many people say they would vote for women even if seats were not reserved, she does not believe they would actually follow through. Currently, because of the discrimination she witnesses, Palkyi believes that seats must be reserved or else women would not receive any votes (Palkyi 4/29/09).

Interestingly, most people I interviewed could explain both sides of the controversy over the quota system. People who are pro-quota believe it helps to encourage qualified women to fill government positions. People against the gender quota say that it makes women look inferior because they need reserved seats to be elected. As shown, only one of my interviewees believed a quota was unnecessary. Even though everyone described the anti-quota opinion, no one I spoke to actually held that opinion. This could be explained by the fact that I interviewed a small group of Tibetans. It could also show that gender awareness is increasing and people now recognize a necessity which might not have been as clear in the past.

Women were also asked this question in the 2003 TWA survey. Eighty percent of participants in the survey believe that it is necessary to reserve seats for women, while the twenty percent who disagree were mainly in the twenty to thirty year old age group (The Status of Exiled Tibetan Women in India 38). The

analysts of the survey explain that, “some think reservation is an affront to women’s talents and merits because it indicates that women are weaker and less equal” (The Status of Exiled Tibetan Women in India 38).

The two main issues brought up in my interviews are if there were no reserved seats whether women would not receive votes or whether they would avoid public office on their own account. The second explanation seemed to be more common due to the fact that most people said that women have equal access to government positions but do not have enough confidence to step up and take positions in the Parliament. This observation is supported by the fact that when the reservation of women’s seats was eliminated in 1974 it caused a total absence of women deputies from 1982 to 1990 (The Status of Exiled Women in India 49).

### **Stepping up and the Example of Miss Tibet**

The analysts of the TWA survey point out that there “seems to be a natural tendency among Tibetan women to adopt their traditional roles as nurturers and keepers of traditions (The Status of Exiled Tibetan Women in India 45). Karma Choephel explained that women are more reluctant to come out because of their tendency to be modest (Choephel 4/20/09). While women are active in public life it seems to take a lot more courage in the Tibetan community to step up into the spotlight. Tenzin Choying explained how there is gender discrimination in the community because often if girls step out into the public eye they can often be looked at as “cheap” (Choying 4/22/09). Modesty is so ingrained in the Tibetan society, especially in women, that when someone breaks from this expectation it is considered inappropriate and the person is looked down upon.

Both Lobsang Wangyal and Pema Youdon described how people are very judgmental of people who put themselves in the public eye, especially if they make a mistake (Wangyal 4/18/09, T. Youdon 4/14/09). Pema gave the example of a woman speaking to a group of people, if she makes a mistake people, often other women, will make side comments and criticize her (P. Youdon 4/14/09). Lobsang described how people were more discouraging than encouraging to people, especially women who put themselves out there (Wangyal 4/18/09).

One example of women being hesitant to step out into the spotlight is the Miss Tibet Pageant, created by Lobsang Wangyal. He started the pageant to shake up the community, he believed it would be shocking because “the Tibetan culture is so conservative” (Wangyal 4/18/09). He wanted to create a platform for women to come forward and be themselves; thereby empowering women by letting them show their skills (Wangyal 4/18/09).

Very few women actually participate in this competition though, even though there is a large monetary incentive. The number of participants usually ranges from one to six. Tenzin Youdon explained how girls are encouraged to step up but then ridiculed by members of the community when they do, so it is a very discouraging example for women in the Tibetan community (T. Youdon 4/14/09). Lobsang Wangyal seemed to understand that Tibetans felt that they are losing their quiet compassionate nature by being outgoing, “Miss Tibet and women standing up is not about forgetting the ethics and morals of Tibetans but being strong and powerful enough to represent our compassionate culture. It is

about bringing out the potential you have while always benefiting others”  
(Wangyal 4/18/09).

### **Feminist Agendas**

Most quota systems in the world are implemented to increase the number of women’s voices in the government which theoretically increases the amount of attention focused on women’s issues. The authors of the TWA survey state that, “an increase in the number of women’s representation in the Assembly will generate more attention and discussion on women’s issues providing space for the perspectives of women in the overall decision making process” (The status of Exiled Tibetan Women in India 51). In contrast, Karma Choephel believes that more women in the Parliament would not change the decisions of the Assembly, instead it is just a way to empower women (Choephel 4/20/09). He explained further that female Parliamentarians do not really have a feminist agenda, “they are more concerned with the bigger issue of the Tibetan national cause” (Choephel 4/20/09). Sonam Yangden would agree with this statement. After watching the broadcasted Parliament sessions, she said that women speak less than men but that this does not affect any outcomes because everyone has the same national goal (Yangden 4/25/09).

Karma Choepel admits that some women might have a feminist agenda but are too hesitant to reveal it in a room full of men (Choephel 4/20/09). This same topic is brought up by Alex Butler who says that “some people hesitant to use the word feminist since it would cause a negative reaction to initiatives which would otherwise be rejected” (Butler 193). The fact that people react negatively to

the term feminist means that the community still has room to improve on gender sensitization. The quota system in the Tibetan community represents a way to empower women; it shows that women are as qualified as men to be Assembly members therefore increasing the status of women in the Tibetan community.

## **Conclusion**

As exemplified by the absence of women from parliament during the years when the election of women parliamentarians was not compulsory, a reserved seat quota proves to be essential for including female representation in the Tibetan Parliament in exile. The social tendency and pressure to be modestly reserved especially weighs upon women in the Tibetan community. Fear of being ridiculed or considered egotistical limits women more than any institutional factors.

Historically, Tibetan women have been relatively better off than women in Asia, yet they held no decision making roles in the government until the move to exile. The quota system is one way to make up for this historical imbalance of power.

Whether gender discrimination exists and what forms it manifests in the community in exile needs to be further discussed between Tibetan men and women. The fact that there are far fewer women in the Parliament than men indicates there is some power imbalance between genders in the Tibetan culture. Inequalities might appear within the school systems, civil society, and simply family life. By acknowledging the inequalities which do exist the community can move forward to provide more opportunities for young Tibetan women. If gender biases are ignored or masked with a label of “tradition,” women risk being left out



of important decision making positions, which might further affect their position in the society. While many women do not acknowledge or perceive gender inequality, the quota system just by being implemented shows recognition at some level that women do not have equal access to the government.

As pointed out by Palkyi, discrimination is not institutionalized (Palkyi 4/29/09). Within the law women have equal rights as men. Instead, it is unspoken social pressure which makes it difficult for women to step into the public light and express their ideas. While plenty of talented and capable women exist within the Tibetan community, being nominated for Parliament rests solely on being noticed by peers while trying not to be noticed. Ambitiously seeking a seat, even if it is with benevolent intentions, is not respected in the Tibetan culture and is even frowned upon. It is more difficult for women, who are traditionally the model of modesty in Tibetan culture, to actively seek election. Therefore, the quota system provides space for women to take positions within the Parliament without fear of being rejected by the community for immodesty.

While currently the quota system is not increasing attention on women's issues within the Assembly it might be increasing the thought in more women's minds that they too could be Members of Parliament. As the number of women increases in Parliament, it will move towards the critical mass as described by feminists, more attention may be drawn to women's issues. Palkyi believed that instead of just numbers of women in Parliament, "we need people who are gender sensitized," (Palkyi 4/29/09). As many scholars of gender studies are suggesting,

critical actors for women's issues and rights are needed in Parliaments just as much or more than the critical mass provided by a reserved seat quota system.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

. In America, many people see competitive elections as a key component to a successful democracy. It would be extremely interesting to be in Dharamsala during an election year to observe the campaigns, or lack there of, and examine the level and type of competition within the community. It seemed as if the level of campaigning has slowly been increasing over time and I believe much could be revealed about the Tibetan democracy in exile by exploring this trend.

In terms of gender studies, I believe the education system deserves attention. Young Tibetans spend extended amounts of time at their schools, even at a young age which must influence their perception of gender. What measures are being taken to educate young Tibetans about gender discrimination and what is the response among the youth?

Finally, the women's leadership conferences, which are put on by the TWA and organized by Palkyi will be undergoing some changes in the next few years. These changes will hopefully open up the program to more Tibetan women. Palkyi has many innovative ideas for improving the program which I believe will do great things for the community. A research project on the methods used and results from this program could reveal how much potential exists within the women of the Tibetan community.

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