

## WHERE WOMEN GROW

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH THE THIRD SECTOR

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**N**ON-GOVERNMENTAL, NON-PROFIT, CHARITABLE AND volunteer organisations have successfully acquired central roles in the international system, and now participate in the process of decision-making and development in nearly all parts of the world. These organisations are referred to as the *Third Sector* of the economy and are recognized as important players along with the institutions in the public and the private sectors. The organisational structures of the EU and the UN clearly reflect this development: both take measures to include the participation of NGOs through various forums and committees. As a consequence, Third Sector organizations frequently influence the actions and decisions of institutions such as governments and multinational corporations through direct consultations, indirect pressure or lobbying. Power to influence and promote change is no longer centred only among those with economic and political power, but is increasingly in the hands of the organised “masses”. This new allocation of power has had a significant effect on society and has attracted large amounts of interest and research. Literature on the subject is often focused on the positive effects this phenomenon has had on the spread of democracy, third world social development, and the empowerment of civil society and marginalized groups.

Women, as a group, are often empowered through the Third Sector. Not only are they targeted to be the beneficiaries of aid from NGOs, but they are also frequently employees in the organisations *per se*. According to a recent survey by the British Equal Opportunities Commission, women make up more than seventy percent of the work force in the sector, a rather high proportion when compared to the public and private ones. From a global perspective, this could be because women’s involvement is enhanced as states become more democratic and extend civil liberties to all groups of society. Also, their ability to pressure and influence more prosperous and

powerful actors increases as women are given more freedom to congregate and express their opinions. Furthermore, the advancements in communication technology have undoubtedly accelerated this process. In this case, the term *empowerment* refers to the fact that women

today, more than before, are able to affect the outcome of bureaucratic and non-transparent political and social processes on the local, national and international level.

This does not shed light on why so many women – compared to men – choose to work in the Third Sector, especially since they are still under-represented in the private sector. If women are given equal opportunities to men by law, why isn’t the division of labour more even across the sectors in practice? One would assume a more balanced distribution in the developed world, but this is not the case. It may be because women find the Third Sector more in line with their interests and ambitions than men do. Some scholars maintain that women are more naturally focused on “soft” issues such as education, environment, health, children and poverty relief, and would therefore prefer the less competitive and aggressive surroundings of non-profit work. Or, it could be that

women would be just as content to work in the private sector, but still find themselves somewhat excluded from it due to high competitiveness.

It would be interesting to discover the reasons that contribute to the concentrated involvement of females in the Third Sector, which relates to the question of whether it really is a sign of deliberate empowerment or rather, if it is an indication that women are still not considered to be equally capable as men when it comes to working in the other sectors. Most likely it is a combination of both factors. Certainly, women have on several occasions had to venture into the Third Sector to reach their goals in absence of alternate channels of influence and, by doing so, have ended up increasing their knowledge, skills and power. After the fall of the Soviet regime the processes of

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democratisation and privatisation led to a social marginalisation of women in the former communist republics. Politics and business became relatively riddled with corruption and patriarchy, which not only reduced female participation but also shifted the focus away from the “soft” issues. To counter this, women formed groups based on volunteer participation, and as they became more numerous and stronger, they were again able to put pressure on the public and private sectors to increase the rights of women and children. Today NGOs in these countries have, to a large extent, become a part of the political system and women have gained more credibility as capable participants in the areas of business and politics as well.

This suggests that women do perhaps have more of an interest in soft issues than men. But also that social exclusion forces them to make use of Third Sector methods of influence even though they could just as well reach their goals in the public and private sectors if these were more accessible. It is reasonable to assume that women could achieve as much – if not more – progress on the soft issues by aiming for high profile positions in politics and business. Nevertheless, it seems that the traditional gender roles of men and women enhance the likelihood of women ending up in the Third Sector. To some degree, even women in the modernised world are still expected to take care of home and family, while men are supposed to be the main breadwinners. This means the competitive and high paid jobs of the private sector which demand long hours over many years are more accessible to men, while the Third Sector, which offers volunteer work and more flexible positions fit better with the “traditional” role of the female. Such a view does not take into account individual traits or ambitions, but many employers still tend to base their hiring decisions on this type of reasoning.

In part, this could explain why women are frequently unable to break through the “glass ceiling” which is separating them from the top managerial positions. According to the survey mentioned above, even in the Third Sector, where women make up the majority, men hold more than half of the leadership positions. One would think that if women chose to work in the Third Sector simply because it better suits their interest areas and abilities, the proportion

of female leaders would match the total percentage of women in the sector. The skewed gender distribution cannot be attributed solely to the employers. Women seem to be more reluctant than men to join the competition for the higher paying jobs. It has been claimed that this stems from genetic differences between men and women, referring to the assumption that men are naturally more aggressive and ambitious than women. This does not automatically make them more capable of managing organizations in the private sector, but it seems to make them more comfortable with receiving praise for their efforts and also with praising themselves. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to understate their talents and experiences. Another theory is that women still conform to traditional social gender roles. Whichever is more accurate, the outcome is just the same; women in general tend to stay in lower level jobs with lower wages regardless of which sector they work in.

If seen over a period of time, however, the situation today differs greatly from only a few decades ago. Women are increasingly striving for leadership positions in all sectors, and the female ratio in the private sector and in politics is rising. The expansion of the Third sector has undoubtedly contributed to this development. Whether it is due to necessity or interest, women use the available resources to establish new organizations or join others, and then use their acquired skills to further enhance the importance and influence of the sector. Hence, women are empowered by the Third Sector, but at the same

time they help empower the sector *as a whole*. Furthermore, women with backgrounds from non-profit work also move on to positions in the other sectors and thereby attain more political and economic power. The higher female ratio in the Third Sector could simply be a necessary step on the way to more recognition and equality in society in general; a step that women need to make use of actively. □

