

Women gaining power around the world

Bill Lambrecht
KRT Wire Service

Sworn in as president of Liberia, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf vowed to attack the corruption that lay beneath the recent bloodshed and despair in her African nation.

In Chile, newly inaugurated President Michelle Bachelet, tortured as a teen during a dictatorship, was propelled to power by voters who were weary of machismo politics and corrupt leaders.

Angela Merkel, elected in November as Germany's first woman chancellor, leaped to power earlier in her career after her mentor, ex-Chancellor Helmut Kohl, was cut down by a slush-fund scandal.

Where trouble and corruption hang in the air, voters around the world are increasingly turning to women to clean up the mess left behind by bad-old-boy networks.

The United States trails much of the world in the success of female candidates, ranking behind dozens of countries in the percentage of women elected to parliamentary bodies.

That is due in large measure to the fact that about 70 countries now prescribe hard quotas or voluntary goals for women's participation.

But some U.S. strategists believe the budding lobbying scandal in Washington will heighten the chances of women candidates who are trying to unseat Congressional

incumbents in November. And the groundbreaking successes of women in other nations have helped rekindle talk about if, and when, a woman will be elected to the White House.

"People are talking about Hillary and Condi and thinking why, if it can happen in Germany and Chile and Liberia, can't it happen in the United States?" said Yolanda Richardson, president of the Center for Development and Population Activities, a Washington-based nonprofit group that works to improve the lives of women and girls.

She was referring to Sen. Hillary Clinton of New York, spouse of the ex-president and a leading light in the Democratic Party; and Condoleezza Rice, the secretary of

state whose political fortunes received a boost recently when First Lady Laura Bush said she should run for the Republican's presidential nomination.

Political veterans wonder if 2008 is a realistic goal for a woman reaching the presidency, given Clinton's lightning-rod status and Rice's assertion that she won't run.

Nonetheless, Richardson and other strategists say that around the world, women are fast climbing into new realms of power.

"The trend lines are good. Increasingly there are breakthroughs in women achieving leadership positions, and it's happening faster than ever before," she said.

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