

Information Brief

**Gender and Political Development:
Women and Political Leadership in
the Commonwealth**



The Commonwealth



Introduction

The Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015 (PoA)¹ and post-2015 Commonwealth gender priorities draw on international commitments for the realisation of women's rights enshrined in CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals and other agreements on health and education targets. The MDGs and other international instruments have been catalysts to increase the representation of women in leadership roles and decision-making positions by 2015. The United Nations and the Commonwealth Secretariat have committed to assisting their member countries to reach gender equality within the proscribed time frame. International

¹ See *The Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015*. Commonwealth Secretariat. Available at http://www.thecommonwealth.org/Internal/33902/38116/poa_2005_2015/

organisations, development institutions and civil society have also contributed to reaching these global commitments. The PoA recommends member countries achieve a target of no less than 30% of women in decision-making in the political, public and private sectors by 2015, the Commonwealth still faces a steep challenge in reaching this target.

Current situation of women in leadership positions

Around the world, a lack of gender balance in decision-making positions in governments persist. Global statistics reveal that women continue to be under-represented in national parliaments, the share of women among Ministers now averages 20.4%; an increase of 1.4% from 2011². The highest positions are even more elusive; as at spring 2014, 22 women Heads of State and/or Government out of 194 in the world served simultaneously (a rise from 20 in 2011). Four are currently from Commonwealth countries: *Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh and Portia Simpson-Miller of Jamaica, and Presidents Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca of Malta and Kamla Persad-Bissessar of Trinidad and Tobago.*³ Furthermore, HM Queen Elizabeth II have been represented by women Governor-Generals in Antigua and Barbuda, Australia, The Bahamas,

² Inter-Parliamentary Union 'Women in National Parliaments' 31 March 2012 accessed from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/arc/world010213.htm>

³ Female World Leaders Currently in Power accessed from http://www.filibustercartoons.com/charts_rest_female-leaders.php

Barbados, Canada, Grenada, New Zealand and St Lucia.⁴ It is noteworthy to share the significance of the first female Chair of the Commonwealth, Prime Minister Persad Bissessar of Trinidad and Tobago, who handed over to another female leader, the Prime Minister Gillard of Australia in 2011.

From 2010-2014, women leaders were re-elected and/or appointed as Deputy/Vice Presidents in Bangladesh, Dominica, Guyana, Kiribati, Malawi, Mauritius, Singapore, Trinidad and Tobago and Zambia.⁵ Many women have held Ministerial positions beyond Gender portfolios, such as Foreign Affairs, Finance, Defence, Environment, Public Service, Energy, Justice, etc., positions which have been traditionally held by men. A number of women were also appointed as Speaker or Deputy Speaker of Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament. There are only 41 Women Speakers out of the 189 Parliaments globally, and 16 are from the Commonwealth.⁶

The Commonwealth is committed to increase support for the advancement of women in leadership at national and regional levels. The target of 30% of women in decision-making in parliament and local government has been achieved through the introduction of affirmative

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Worldwide Guide to Women in Leadership: Female Vice Presidents and Deputy Heads of States *accessed from* <http://www.guide2womenleaders.com/Vice-Presidents.htm>

⁶ Women Speakers of National Parliaments *accessed from* <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/speakers.htm>

action measures such as quotas and reserved seats in some Commonwealth countries.

Commonwealth Women Speakers

<p><i>Africa region:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Botswana (National Assembly) ▪ Mozambique (Assembleia da Republica) ▪ Rwanda (Chamber of Deputies) ▪ South Africa (National Assembly) ▪ Swaziland (Senate); ▪ Uganda (Parliament) ▪ United Republic of Tanzania (Bunge) 	<p><i>Asia region:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bangladesh (Jatiya Sangsad) ▪ India (Lok Sabha) ▪ Singapore (Parliament) <p><i>Europe Region</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ United Kingdom (House of Lords);
<p><i>Caribbean region</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bahamas (Senate); ▪ Barbados (Senate); ▪ Dominica (House of Assembly); 	<p><i>Pacific region:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Australia (House of Representatives); ▪ Fiji (Parliament)

The Commonwealth is making giant strides towards mainstreaming gender. In August 2014, 43 countries had achieved the 30% global target in lower and upper houses of parliament, 16 countries are from the Commonwealth, namely: Antigua and Barbuda, Australia, Belize, Cameroon, Canada, Grenada, Guyana, Lesotho, Mozambique, New Zealand, Rwanda, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda. Rwanda

still tops the list with parliament consisting of 64% women, closely followed by Seychelles with 43% and South Africa with 41%.⁷ In addition, the Africa region ranks high in the number of women in governance, followed by the Caribbean and Asia regions. Even though the number of women in parliament is growing, women's representation still remains at 20%; comparable to global statistics at 21% of seats occupied by women. The regional representation of women is shown in *Figure 1* below.

Women's parliamentary representation remains very weak in the Pacific Island States. Women represent an average of 4.2% of all elected representatives in the Pacific region, a dismal figure in contrast to other regions of the world. In 2010, a few women leaders were selected as potential candidates and served as members of parliament in Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu.⁸ Notably, Kiribati's Vice President, Teima Onorio, is the country's only female MP and first female cabinet member in 26 years⁹. In 2012, three female MPs joined the Solomon Islands National Parliament, similarly, in Papua New Guinea, three women won open seats into parliament. The

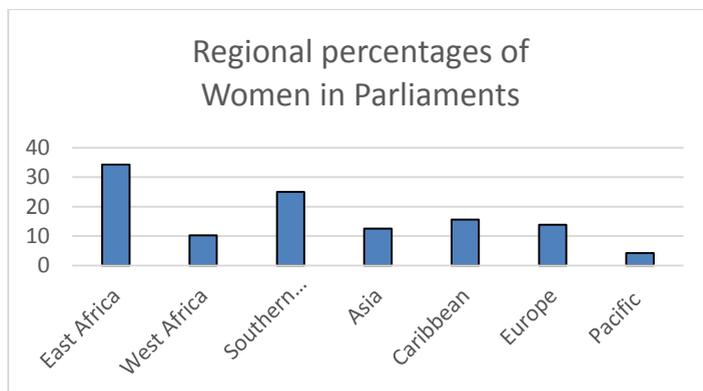
⁷ Women in Politics: Inter-Parliamentary Union accessed from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

⁸ Inter-parliamentary Union: Women in National Parliaments accessed from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>; <http://www.guide2womenleaders.com/Vice-Presidents.htm>

⁹ Worldwide Guide to Women in Leadership: Female Vice Presidents and Deputy Heads of States accessed from <http://www.guide2womenleaders.com/Vice-Presidents.htm>

representation of women in Commonwealth parliaments is shown in *Figures 2 - 6* in graphs below.

Figure 1: Female Representation in Parliament as % of Total Number of Seats by Region



Across the Commonwealth, women have played critical roles in local governance. Female elected councillors and mayors are under-represented in all regions of the world. Following constitutional amendments to reserve one-third of all local government seats for women in India and Bangladesh, over one million women have been elected to India's Panchayat Raj and Bangladesh's Upazila Parishad¹⁰.

¹⁰ Womensphere 'India reserves 50% seats for women in local self-government' 24 September 2009 accessed from <http://womensphere.wordpress.com/2009/09/24/india-reserves-50-seats-for-women-in-local-self-government/>

Namibia¹¹ and Lesotho¹² have attained over 30% representation of women in local governance. New Zealand¹³, South Africa¹⁴ and Uganda¹⁵ have also reached the global target of 30% of women at the local government level.

Perceived obstacles and recommendations

A lack of gender balance still persists, particularly in the Pacific Island member countries and less than 10% of women parliamentarians in the West Africa region. The under-representation of women is mostly symptomatic of persistent gender stereotypes, conflict between family and work demands, patriarchy and the lack of an enabling political environment, inadequate funding to support female candidates, the absence of special measures/quotas, low literacy levels, the lack of job security in politics, the absence of female role models and a lack of training for political participation. This

¹¹ Electoral Institute for Southern Africa ‘Namibia - Women’s Representation Quotas 2009’ accessed from <http://www.eisa.org.za/WEP/namquotas.htm>

¹² Gender Links ‘Gender, Elections and Media Factsheet: Women in Lesotho Politics’ accessed from www.genderlinks.org.za/attachment.php?aa_id=11848

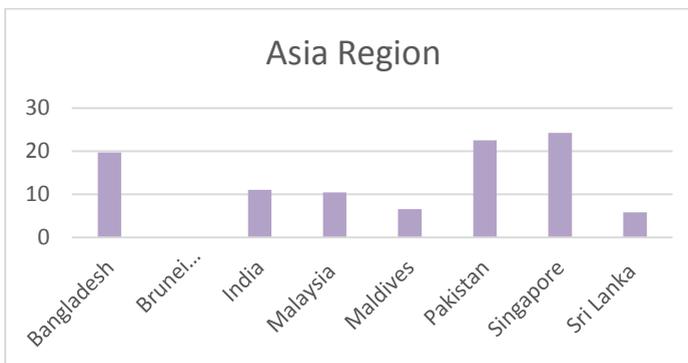
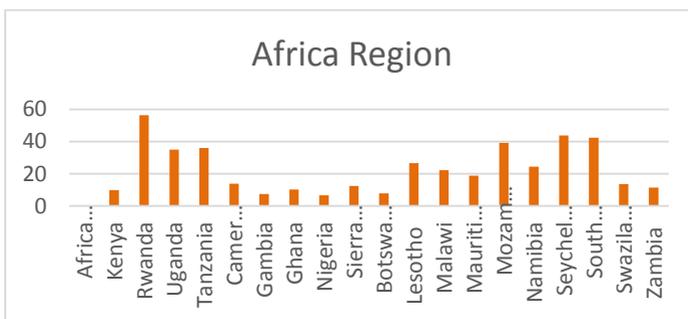
¹³ Local Government Association of South Australia ‘Women in Local Government’ accessed from <http://www.lga.sa.gov.au/site/page.cfm?u=1610>

¹⁴ Electoral Institute for Southern Africa: South Africa 2011 Local election candidates by province and gender accessed from <http://www.eisa.org.za/WEP/sou2011candidates1.htm>

¹⁵ The Republic of Uganda Ministry of Local Government ‘Challenges Confronting Women Leaders in Local Government - The Uganda Experience’ (May 2008) accessed from http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpa_n031076.pdf

situation calls for more concerted action by Commonwealth governments to increase women's representation in both public and private sectors to the agreed minimum of 30 per cent.

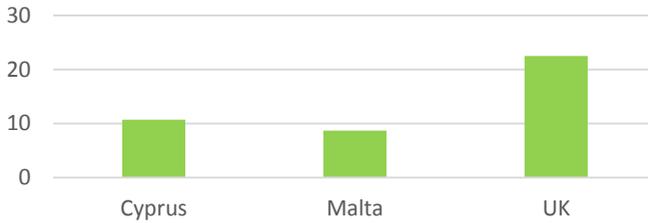
Figures 2 - 6: Women's political representation in the regions of the Commonwealth



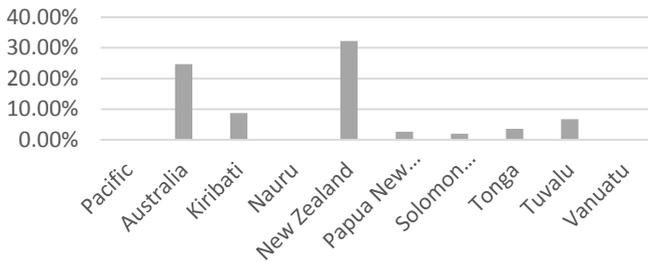
Caribbean and Canada Region



European Region



Pacific Region



Strategies to increase women's representation in decision-making

Electoral and political reform - The most popular electoral model widely practiced across the Commonwealth is the First Past the Post/simple majority electoral models, considered to support the incumbent, and not favourable to women's political candidacy. Markedly, electoral reform and introduction of quotas into political party structures has brought about the rise of women's representation in many Commonwealth countries. Studies have shown that party-list proportional representation and mixed-member proportionality (a combination of party list and simple majority electoral models) have advanced the representation of women in decision-making in Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, New Zealand, South Africa, and in a number of Caribbean countries.

Quotas used in politics - Over 70 countries globally have adopted alternative forms of quotas, which have advanced the participation of women in decision-making. There are three notable types of gender quotas used in politics: 1) reserved seats (constitutional and/or legislative); 2) legal candidate quotas and/or reserved constituencies (constitutional and/or legislative); and 3) Political party quotas (voluntary). A combination of quotas with the first past the post electoral model has proved effective in fast-tracking the representation of women in Bangladesh, India, Rwanda and Uganda.¹⁸ Reserved constituencies and/or reserved seats for women to contest independently and by direct election

has worked in the Rwanda, Swaziland and Uganda national elections, and in Bangladesh, India and Lesotho local governance. Voluntary quotas have effectively mainstreamed women in South Africa adopted by the ruling party the African National Congress. Tanzania was the first African country to introduce quotas in its constitution, now emulated in many other African countries. South Africa's 2012 National Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender now guarantees equitable representation of women at all levels of decision-making across all political parties and sectors.

Capacity building for women - Some countries have provided leadership and management training for women to 'build the capacity of female political aspirants' as well as to equip them with qualities such as 'self-confidence and assertiveness' as most agree that "economic disadvantage impedes equal participation."¹⁶ The continued dominance of political life ... by men is not good for men and it's not good for women. Affirmative action for women representation at all decision making levels remains a challenge, seen as positive action for women at the detriment of men. Thus awareness creation and training activities are being used to sensitise societies to the need to vote for women

¹⁶ Challenges and Strategies for Democratic Participation, Lisa Irvin (July 2006)

across many African countries, including Botswana, Lesotho and Nigeria.¹⁷

Australia, Canada and Trinidad and Tobago have succeeded in strengthening the representation of women in local governance without introducing affirmative action policies; through civil society capacity building efforts for women interested in local governance.¹⁸

Adoption and Implementation of national gender policies - Seven member countries have formalised gender equalities through the adoption and implementation of national gender policies for women's equality and at least 26 member countries are drafting their national gender policies. Some countries have a variation of national gender policies, for example Pakistan has a Sexual Harassment Bill (but it excludes domestic workers), and Sri Lanka has a Citizens Amendment Act that guarantees equal rights for women and men. The Bahamas, Botswana and Grenada have drafted National Gender Policies that are yet to be adopted. Many countries, particularly in the Pacific region, have just commenced the process.

¹⁷ UN Economic Commission for Africa 'Beijing Platform for Action +15 Africa Synthesis Report', 2009:15 *accessed from* http://www.uneca.org/eca_programmes/acgd/beijingplus15/documents/15YearReviewofBPfA.pdf

¹⁸ Ibid.

Financial Resources - Many women are limited by financial resources which further inhibit their effective participation in politics. A dedicated fund should be set aside through state or party mandates to support women's advocacy and political campaigns. Women entrepreneurs can also serve as donors to support women's electoral campaigns.

Mass mobilisation of women - Apart from legal or electoral reforms, a mass mobilisation of women can lobby political parties to mainstream women in party manifestoes and electoral campaigns. Women are known to be the highest number of voters in any election, and can exchange their votes for positive action.

Target accomplished women to join politics - Government and civil society groups can target accomplished, competent and qualified women leaders and groom them for political leadership. These women have established families with reduced family responsibilities, wide experience, loyal constituency and are financially stable. These women can also be mentored by other women in political authority. Appointing women leaders into positions of authority has proved effective in many Commonwealth countries.

Involving male champions - Practically it is important to partner with men who have long-standing control of power, and sensitise them to understand gender equity, equality and mainstreaming. In this way, male champions can serve as agents for change for the

inclusion and effective participation of women at all levels and across all sectors including the home.

This information brief is drawn from the priority action thematic work areas on Gender and Political Development of the Commonwealth Secretariat's Gender Section.

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