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1. Strategies to Increase Women’s Representation in Parliaments in Small States
2. A Women’s Agenda in Parliament? If Not Why Not? If so What Should it Be?
3. ‘Engaging Political Parties to Improve Gender-responsive Governance’

The Commonwealth Context

The Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005–2015 (PoA) draws 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 United Nations and the Commonwealth Secretariat have committed to assisting their member countries to reach gender equality within the proscribed time frame. Democracy at national and local levels promotes the transparency and accountability essential to efficient and effective delivery of public services and to economic growth. The Secretariat, through its Social Transformation Programmes Division, is leading on work on democracy, women’s political representation and women in decision-making positions.

Currently, there is a lack of gender balance in decision-making positions in government around the world. Global statistics reveal that women continue to be under-represented in national parliaments, and the share of women among Ministers averages at 19 per cent. The highest positions are even more elusive; only 20 of 193 Heads of State and/or Government in the world are women. Seven of these are Commonwealth MEMBER countries namely, Prime Minister Julia Gillard of Australia, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed of Bangladesh, President Pratibha Patil of India, Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar of Trinidad and Tobago, and in 2012, Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller of Jamaica, President Joyce Banda of Malawi, and President Monique Ohsan-Bellepeau of Mauritius. In addition, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II is represented by women Governor-Generals in Antigua and Barbuda, Australia, The Bahamas, Barbados, Canada, New Zealand and St Lucia.

The Commonwealth is committed to increase support for the advancement of women in leadership at national and regional levels. The target of 30 per cent of women in decision making in parliament and local government has been achieved by the introduction of affirmative action measures such as quotas and reserved seats in some Commonwealth

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1 Ms Ogunsanya represented Dr Sylvia Anie, the Director, Social Transformation Programmes Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat, London at the 58th CPA Conference
countries. 13 out of the top 40 countries for mainstreaming women into parliament are Commonwealth member countries – Australia, Canada, Guyana, Mozambique, Namibia, New Zealand, Rwanda, Seychelles, Singapore, South Africa, Tanzania, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uganda. Rwanda tops the list with parliament consisting of 56 per cent women, closely followed by Seychelles with 43 per cent and South Africa with 42 per cent. In addition, the Caribbean region ranks high in the number of women in governance, followed by the Africa and Asia regions. Even though the number of women in parliament is growing, women’s representation still remains below 20 per cent: this is comparable with global statistics, which show that on average only 19 per cent of seats are occupied by women.

Although women have also played critical roles in local governance, female elected councillors and mayors are still under-represented in all regions of the world. In the Commonwealth, constitutional amendments to reserve one-third of all local government seats for women in India resulted in over one million women been elected to the Panchayat Raj throughout the country. Namibia and Lesotho have over 40 per cent representation of women in local governance. Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Uganda have also reached the global target of 30 per cent of women represented at the local government level.

Unfortunately, particular weakness still persists in both the Pacific region, where women represent an average of less than four (4) per cent of all elected representatives, and less than nine (9) per cent in the West Africa region. Studies have shown that 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.

The case for women’s participation in politics

Gender main-streaming is critical for sustainable development, and to achieve sustainable development, the participation of women is indispensable because of their social, economic and political roles. It is necessary to recognise the contribution and role of women as agents for change in transforming societies for future generations. Gender equity is crucial to encourage good governance, transparency and accountability. Women are half of the world’s population and indeed out of the two billion peoples in the Commonwealth; half of its citizens are women and girls. They form the highest number of voters in any election, yet they are the least represented in governance and at all levels of decision-making processes across all sectors. Inadvertently, women ought to have equitable opportunities to hold leadership positions at all levels of decision-making.

In particular circumstances, women activists face torture, political detention and unlawful imprisonment, and women attempting to enter politics face much resistance from their husbands, families and society at large. To overcome the dilemma of fewer women in governance, therefore, greater access to information is required. Research has shown that where sufficient numbers of women have joined in leadership positions and decision-making bodies, they have created a more collaborative atmosphere, characterised by mutual respect, less corruption, integrity, priority focused, and have sought consensus, rather than a winner take all solution. Women bring a new dimension to the accepted norms and positively influence all stakeholders with alternative perspectives, foster growth, build partnerships, serve as role-models and reconcile divergent interests or groups.

Women have contributed significantly in peace processes, preventive diplomacy, capacity building initiatives, post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding. Further, women have
served as mediators between combating parties to broker ceasefire and peace agreements, while other women have adapted their skills to transform governance and decision-making processes in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. Moreover, women’s political participation has resulted in substantial gains for democracy, and enormous advantages in responding to citizens’ demands, as well as improved cooperation between political parties and ethnic groups, thus leading to stability and sustainable peace.

**Strategies for increasing women’s representation in Parliament**

Even though the Commonwealth has made giant strides towards mainstreaming gender and empowering women's effective participation in parliaments, sustained efforts is critical to break through barriers to promote gender equality in all spheres and across all sectors. Effective strategies to increase women’s representation in decision-making are highlighted below:

*Constitutional reform*

Commitment to constitutional democracy is a prerequisite for credible elections, equitable participation of women, a level playing field for all political actions, with an effective electoral system that guarantees the participation of all peoples in the electoral process. An electoral legal framework must be clear, unambiguous and enshrined in the constitution of the country, which is acceptable to electoral stakeholders. The absence of constitutional democracy leads to poor governance, and is a main cause of protracted conflicts. Constitutional reform is essential to amend, abrogate or replace old laws towards establishing the rule of law, protecting human and people’s rights, and fostering democracy. Constitutional reform should not serve as an exercise to limit the powers of the opposition, remove checks and balances on government power, or consolidate the power of the President and limit the power of the populace.

Constitutional reform is an effective tool to ensure women have equal opportunities to participate in the political and electoral process. This has been successful in a number of Commonwealth countries including Bangladesh, India, Lesotho, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda. Tanzania was the first African country to include 20 per cent representation of women in its national constitution of 1998, and as a result many Tanzanian women leaders have held and still hold international positions including Dr Asha-Rose Migiro, the United Nations Deputy Secretary-General, and Mrs Gertrude Mongella, the former President of the African Union Pan African Parliament. Moreover, implementation, enforcement and monitoring of constitutional amendments are critical for effective action. Other measures for national government action include adoption of national gender policies, affirmative action, gender training for officials, and amending the legal framework to pave the way for electoral reform.

*Electoral and political reform*

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, mixed-member proportionality (a combination of party list and simple majority electoral models), and reserved seats for women have advanced the representation of women in decision-making in Bangladesh, India, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, New Zealand, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda and in a number of Caribbean nations.

Zebra/zip participation of women is encouraged in Namibia, Rwanda and South Africa. In the East Africa region, quotas and reserved seats for women have increased the
participation of women despite the First Past the Post electoral model. This is yet to be realised in West Africa and the Pacific regions. Mandatory provision of financial resources for women’s electoral campaigns should also be encouraged.

**Engaging Political Party Structures**

The growing recognition of women’s political participation in leadership across the Commonwealth has been widely acknowledged. Many countries have continued to strengthen systems of government, introduced accountability measures, and increased women’s representation through the adoption and implementation of quotas and other affirmative action policies. Moreover, political party structures need to change to accommodate equitable representation of women, such as ensuring quota representation of women in candidates’ list prior to an election. Political parties have the mandate and organisational tentacles to reach extensively across any country.

Women groups need to tap into the immense potential of political parties as social mobilisers towards attaining gender equality in all party structures and at all levels. This can be achieved through intense lobbying through individual and collective commitments in the election manifestoes of political parties, to drive the clarion call for women’s empowerment as a central part of their electoral campaigns. In some Latin American countries, women have secured the manifestoes of political parties as an exchange for their electoral votes. This has proved successful as a positive influence and a form of *soft power* attributed to women. Further, through effective monitoring and evaluation, they can hold government and political party structures accountable for non-implementation through the parliamentary oversight of the executive and opposition parties, to ensure gender mainstreaming is attained.

Further, through political parties, women groups can influence youth leaders and aspiring politicians to harness the energies of youth leaders to advocate for gender equality and other forms of direct action to influence the participation of young women to secure the effective participation of women leaders for future national leadership roles. Women’s organisations need to prioritise key needs for the inclusion of women in political processes and recommend region-wide policies. They can also pressurise for increase access to resources – financial and technical – by creating a database of specific challenges facing women and document strategies and programmes developed by and for women to meet these challenges. These key issues and strategies can be shared with political parties in an effort to sensitise and influence their constituencies and key stakeholders on the importance of sharing the political space with women.

**Target accomplished professional women**

Women over 40–45 years of age are considered ideal candidates because most of them already have established careers and reduced family responsibilities. Their talents and experiences in professional fields in government, corporate/private sector and civil society can be tapped into to run for political office. Moreover, they tend to be more financially stable and have greater roots in their communities. These women are leaders by their own right and have a loyal constituency which can leverage their political candidacy. The challenge is that most of these women have limited experience in politics and public service; hence capacity building is critical to build confidence and expertise in this work area. These women can be referred to existing training programmes, leadership institutes, fundraising schools, offered nationally and/or internationally.
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. Awareness creation and training activities are being used to sensitize societies to the need to vote for women across many African countries, including Botswana, The Gambia, Lesotho and Nigeria. Trinidad and Tobago has succeeded in strengthening the representation of women in local governance without introducing affirmative action policies; this has been achieved through civil society capacity building efforts for women interested in local governance.

A pool of eminent women leaders across CW regions can serve as experts by providing regional perspectives in a series of workshops, seminars to impart the needed skills essential for political development, electoral campaigns, voice projection and diversification of skills. In this way, connect aspirants to opportunities for leadership and share success stories on the benefits of public service. Women leaders should be sensitised to support women aspirants in their political journey. Further, by encouraging women to take up political office at all levels, it gives them the mandate as elected officials to change and amend repugnant laws for the benefit of all women. Moreover, financial support is pertinent for women’s political and electoral campaigns. Women entrepreneurs could serve as donors by establishing specific funds or fund-raising campaigns to support female political aspirants.

Redrawing of voting districts

Research has shown that women have more success winning open seats. Geographical constituencies are voting districts formed by the National Electoral Commissions, created to ensure the needs and interests of the people in each geographical area are represented in the various Legislative Assemblies. Thus the redrawing of voting districts gives way for open seats which are likely to be filled by women. Incumbents have a greater advantage in securing their seats during re-election, and it is much more difficult for women to unseat men in well-established constituencies. Thus the creating of new districts helps to open the playing field and encourage the participation of more women into politics.

Civil Society Engagement

Civil society can play a crucial role as a pressure group in highlighting gender disparities. Women’s groups need to increase pressure through networking and advocacy on gender mainstreaming, protection of women’s rights and prioritising media mobilization on women’s role in political processes. The media needs to improve the status of women by advocating that women’s issues involve both men and women to hasten change in customs, beliefs and values. The media should be encouraged to project women in a positive way, support their election campaign(s), and act as an agent for change on gender equity through portraying women in their multiple roles, and highlighting positive achievements.

Lobby groups should advocate a fifty-fifty campaign in favour of ‘one man and one woman’ regardless of the electoral system adopted. For example, ‘Sister Namibia’ led a national campaign that included over twenty Namibian NGOs who have organised workshops and events around the country for equal representation of women in all areas of decision-making. Furthermore, civil society organisations should provide training in political and electoral processes, public speaking, media skills, civil rights and conflict resolution. Moreover, civil society needs to strengthen its partnership with governments, parliamentarians, and political parties for effective action and influence on gender equality.
Involving ‘male champions’

Many women in dominant patriarchal societies still face many challenges ranging from oppressive cultural traditions, illiteracy, domestic violence, to religious structures. Women’s organisations need to involve influential men as ‘champions’ to act as agents for change by increasing the capacity of men to understand the challenges facing women, and involving them in signing international protocols. In this way, they would be able to understand the socio-cultural divide and be encouraged to embrace conventional laws and statutes that protect women such as CEDAW.

Women groups should also mobilise personal and community networks to ensure the broad participation of women in political processes and promote awareness of electoral rules and regulations. These challenges and strategies can be leveraged by all party leaders to educate the electorate on the importance of including women as part of its national development priorities and define specific contributory roles to accelerate progress towards achieving gender equality at all levels of decision.

Moving a Women’s Agenda in Parliament

Parliaments are well placed to provide a strong role model for government agencies and other organisations in mainstreaming gender through their own institutional processes and practices. Gender mainstreaming interrogates the gender-neutrality of institutions, particularly through their internal structures, working arrangements, procedures and processes. The ultimate aim of gender mainstreaming is to change the political face, institutional culture and structures of parliaments, and thereby mainstream the aspirations and experiences of women in society. The reality is that most parliaments are not structured to be gender-sensitive, hence the call for a Women’s Agenda.

Gender Sensitive Parliament

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) defines a gender sensitive parliament as one which responds to the needs and interests of both men and women in its structures, operations, methods and in its work as a nation’s peak legislative institution (IPU, 2008:61). Towards achieving gender parity, the institution has to implement changes to promote gender neutral language and behaviour that is non-confrontational. Introduce more family-friendly sitting hours, childcare facilities and parental leave for parliamentarians, and provide gender-sensitive training programmes. For example in Trinidad and Tobago, women parliamentarians are not entitled to maternity leave even though ordinary women citizens can claim such a right. In South Africa, Parliament closes sessions early to accommodate women’s triple shift responsibilities, and has established a crèche within Parliament to accommodate nursing Women Parliamentarians.

The rules of parliament also need to change to accommodate male and female MPs, and avoids restriction or discrimination against women. A more radical step may lead to changes in the structures of parliaments by including a dedicated committee on gender equality such as a women’s caucus, or a specialised committee on gender equality; or rotating positions between male and female MPs for the Chief Whip or Committee Chair, and ensure equal representation in technical committees specifically reserved for male MPs (IPU, 2008:71). A number of Commonwealth countries have institutionalised Women Parliamentary Caucuses to advance women’s agenda, advocate policy reforms, and sensitise on gender mainstreaming.
**Sensitisation on gender mainstreaming**

It is believed that the increasing numbers of women may be viewed as a threat to men’s traditional political power. Sensitisation on gender equality and gender mainstreaming through an effective communication strategy is critical. Women leaders need to be proactive to defend their interests by creating awareness on gender equity and parity through media related programmes, outreaches, wide-campaigns, and educational programmes. Moreover, women leaders need to maintain communication with their constituencies through various advocacy tools and social networks such as twitter, face-book, etc. It becomes pertinent to work in collaboration with civil society, private/corporate sectors, UN agencies and male leaders (champions) to effect change and support the efforts of women.

**Qualitative participation of women in decision-making**

Yet, quantitative representation of women goes beyond numbers to include factors of qualitative leadership and effective participation of women at all levels of decision-making. Capacity building for women in leadership positions and women aspiring into politics is crucial, by providing training and educational programmes for women considering running for political office. Mentorship, shadow leadership, networking and exchange of experiences at the regional and international levels are critical for women’s empowerment. Good communication skills, media/public speaking and image messaging for women leaders are important to profile their capability to lead in decision-making. Apart from gaining insight and good understanding of parliamentary and legislative rules and procedures, women MPs should extend their training in governance issues to encompass specialised skills that will enable them to succeed in political office.

**Diversify beyond gender related issues/matters**

Understanding of gender issues by Parliament members and expert staff is greatly required to understand and address issues during law-making process. Scholars are of the view that a critical mass of women in decision-making will favourably move the agenda of women’s concerns forward. However, women in office need to diversify their priorities to include technical matters such as economics, finance, employment, agriculture, foreign affairs, etc., and should not be seen to be representing women issues or a women’s agenda. Women MPs need to represent non-gender concerns and gain access to traditionally male-dominated political arenas.

**Critical Mass of Women to move agendas favourably**

With the limited number of women Parliamentarians, women Parliament members have encountered many obstacles and challenges in voicing women’s issues in the legislation, budgeting, staff management, and oversight processes. Women Parliamentarians should participate in government policy formulation and implementation, hold government office and execute government functions at all levels. Liaise with donor organisations and non-government groups related to community life and state politics. Moreover, Women MPs should remain united, and should network with women political wings and other female MPs across party lines to resolve conflicts, build coalitions and reach consensus on similar issues that concern women’s political leadership and participation.

**Focus Group Discussions to sensitise on gender mainstreaming**

To understand the obstacles and challenges faced in introducing gender issues in the legislative, budgeting, and monitoring processes, a series of Focus Group Discussions (FGD) involving Parliament members, expert staff of commissions, factions, parliament auxiliaries, and secretariat general and experts and activist groups could be held regularly to
obtain a portrait of challenges and obstacles faced and future recommendations to include gender issues in the House of Representatives/Senate. Further, the formulation of laws and gender responsive budgets can be discussed and articulated in such forums. This has been successful in Indonesia and Australian Parliaments.

Other mechanisms/approaches to strengthen women’s participation in Parliaments include:

- creating a network of gender focal points across other committees of the legislature;
- working in partnership with national women’s machinery, civil society, NGOs, the private sector and the media to ensure follow-up parliamentary action, review and oversight;
- monitoring the progress of gender mainstreaming across parliament;
- scrutinising gender related aspects of all government reporting, as well as the effectiveness of performance indicators used to monitor progress;
- debating the content of bills and ensuring gender considerations are taken into account;
- holding public hearings and consulting with policy communities to determine the effects of policies, programmes and legislation on women and men, girls and boys;
- implementing measures aimed at ensuring gender equality in representation;
- establishing parliamentary committees on gender equality, composed of both men and women;
- making use of the tools of gender-budgeting analysis;
- ensuring gender is mainstreamed in all decisions and legislation;
- allocating sufficient resources for gender-related activities;
- institutionalising gender-sensitive budgeting by raising gender issues during budget debates and developing partnerships with the budget or public accounts committees;
- ensuring the implementation of CEDAW obligations, and similar international conventions/resolutions;
- adopting a programme of equality or theme for every parliamentary term;
- creating gender focal points and gender as a cross-cutting issue addressed in all committees;
- increasing visibility and knowledge of gender equality;
- enhancing mentoring of, and support to, new members; and
- holding governments and senior officials accountable through Ministerial meetings regarding gender mainstreaming and promotion of gender equality and equity.

**Conclusion**

Given parliament’s pre-eminent role is not only in legislating, but in legislative oversight, there is also a need to implement gender mainstreaming practices at the parliamentary level. Systematic efforts to reform institutional structures and practices should be sustained to ensure gender is mainstreamed across all areas of parliament. Without the agreement of political parties, reform of the parliament is impossible. The reality is that policies on gender mainstreaming are being implemented without the necessary changes to the parliamentary structures, hence the consensus and support of political parties is critical for effective change.
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