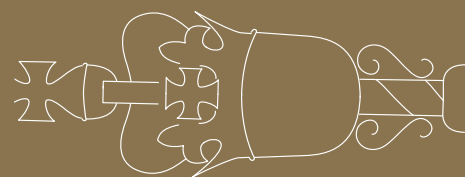




COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION

POSITIVE ACTION MEASURES IN COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTS:

**Assessing the Results of Direct Interventions
for Gender Equality**



About the CPA

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) connects, develops, promotes and supports parliamentarians and their staff to identify benchmarks of good governance and the implementation of the enduring values of the Commonwealth. The CPA collaborates with parliaments and other organisations, including the intergovernmental community, to achieve its statement of purpose. It brings parliamentarians and parliamentary staff together to exchange ideas among themselves and with experts in various fields, to identify benchmarks of good practices and new policy options they can adopt or adapt in the governance of their societies.

About the CWP

The Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) is the network of women Members of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's parliaments and legislatures. The CWP, as an integral part of the CPA, works for the better representation of women in parliaments and legislatures and for the furtherance of gender equality across the Commonwealth.

The CWP network provides a means of building the capacity of women elected to parliament to be more effective in their roles, improving the awareness and ability of all parliamentarians, male and female, and encouraging all parliamentarians to include a gender perspective in all aspects of their role - legislation, oversight and representation - and helping parliaments to become gender-sensitive institutions.

About the GIWL

Global Institute for Women's Leadership - King's College London The Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London works towards a world in which women of all backgrounds have fair and equal access to leadership. Chaired by Julia Gillard, the only woman to have served as Prime Minister of Australia, the institute brings together rigorous research, practice and advocacy to break down the barriers to women becoming leaders, while challenging ideas of what leadership looks like.

Acknowledgements

The CPA and Kings would like to thank the authors Katherine Shuttleworth, Dr. Minna Cowper-Coles, Amy Hewson-Smith, Elona Gashi, and Devangi Roy Dinesh for their dedication and hard work in producing this report. A heartfelt thanks is also given to the women parliamentarians and leaders who contributed to the research component of the report for the time and insights shared during the interviews, which greatly enriched the quality and depth of this work. This report was edited by Bénite Dibateza, Gender Lead with the support of Charlotte Corby, Strategy and Governance Officer on behalf of the CPA.

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Forewords

The representation of women in politics is crucial for a functioning and inclusive democracy. Recent data obtained by the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) network reveals that 56 of the CPA's 180 Member Parliaments have over 30% women's representation, per the target set by the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and endorsed by the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 1997.

Across the Commonwealth, many parliaments are benefitting from the impact of intentional, sustained efforts that empower women to serve as elected leaders. When women are equally represented, parliaments are better equipped to reflect the diverse experiences, perspectives, and needs of the people they serve.

Applying a gender lens to legislation is not only a matter of fairness but of effectiveness. When women, who make up over half of our population, are fully represented in policymaking, societies craft legislation that better reflect the realities of all. Supporting and encouraging the presence of more women in politics and ensuring they have the necessary supports to thrive in their roles, is therefore essential to building inclusive, equitable governance.

The importance of strengthening parliaments using such measures cannot be overstated. Not only do they ensure that democracy is representative of the population, but these measures also afford democratic institutions greater legitimacy as a result. Parliaments must spearhead and be at the forefront of setting the highest standards for fairness and equality, implementing effective policies and operationalising gender sensitive procedures.

The Commonwealth as a collective differs vastly across regions and jurisdictions. Conversely, the same data obtained by the CWP network also found that 16 CPA Member Parliaments have zero women's representation. This report explores the important role of positive action measures such as quotas and reserved seats, that can both elevate the number of women in legislatures and result in greater diversity of perspectives within parliaments and societies.

The CPA and CWP are committed to the highest standards of gender equality, and fundamental to this aim is full and equal representation of women in parliament. For meaningful, sustainable change, parliaments must go beyond representation and be tangible conduits for true gender equality; not only opening doors for more women to enter politics, but also ensuring that those doors remain open, and support for women is reinforced throughout. The CWP network is a platform for advocacy, capacity-building, knowledge exchange, and solidarity that aims to foster gender-sensitive institutions in which parliamentarians of every gender can thrive. Thus, I encourage all parliamentarians to be guided by the best practices and recommendations as outlined within the report. When parliaments are intentional about gender equality, when they implement well-designed positive action measures, and when international and local actors work together to uphold these standards, transformation is inevitable.

I extend my gratitude to the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College, London for their shared commitment to the realisation of representative parliaments and for their support in producing this report for the benefit of jurisdictions across the Commonwealth.

Let us continue this essential work, united in the goal of building democratic institutions that truly represent and serve all.



Hon. Catherine Fife, MPP

Chairperson of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP)

Member of the Ontario Legislative Assembly

As our world faces unprecedented challenges, such as climate change, technological innovations, war and instability, it is crucial that representatives of the full diversity of the community are making the decisions which affect our lives, our planet and our future. Unfortunately, as things stand the Commonwealth falls below the global average in terms of the representation of women, with only one woman for every three men in national legislatures. However, the Commonwealth is able to draw on some remarkable and inspiring stories of change from within its member nations.

In some places, the use of quotas and positive action measures have transformed politics for women, helping them to overcome the barriers that have stood in their way – from bias within political parties to violence, threats, high costs and the burden of care. Thanks to these measures the past fifty years has seen increasing numbers of women take their deserved place as political leaders, which in turn has transformed politics itself. As shown in the interviews in this report, women’s presence in politics has changed policymaking, and institutional culture to be more inclusive.

This report gives insight into how leaders can press for institutional changes and the questions that must be asked when seeking the introduction of quotas and positive action measures. Ensuring the finer details of these measures are suitable for each context is crucial for them to be accepted and effective. This report will serve as an important guide for those leading us to greater change and a more equal future.



The Hon. Julia Gillard, AC

Former Prime Minister of Australia

Chair of the King’s Global Institute for Women’s Leadership

Glossary

ALP – Australian Labor Party

ANC – African National Congress

APPG – All Party Parliamentary Group

AU – African Union

AWS – All-Women Shortlist

BPfA – Beijing Platform for Action

CCM – Chama cha Mapinduzi

CEDAW - Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

FPTP – First Past the Post

IDEA – International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

IPU – Inter-Parliamentary Union

MSP – Member of the Scottish Parliament

NRM – National Resistance Movement

PR – Proportional Representation

RPF – Rwandan Patriotic Front

SADC – Southern African Development Community

SMD- Single Member District

SWAPO – South West Africa People's Organisation

UN – United Nations

WNC – Women's National Coalition

Introduction

Women's underrepresentation in political institutions

The quality of a democracy is not solely determined by the structure of political institutions, the regularity of elections, or voter turnout. It also depends on the extent to which diverse social groups are represented within those institutions.¹ Women remain underrepresented in politics worldwide. Globally, only 27.2% of national parliamentarians, and only 25.8% of Commonwealth parliamentarians, are women.² Women's continued underrepresentation stems from multiple factors, including entrenched gender stereotypes, patriarchal values, insufficient funding and training for candidates, the conflict between family and career demands, and the lack of female political role models. Importantly, the lack of women in politics means that women's issues are not sufficiently represented in political outcomes. Studies show that a fairer balance of men and women in positions of political power would likely ensure women's interests are better reflected in policy.³

Further, increasing women's political presence has a symbolic impact of demonstrating that "politics is not just a man's game",⁴ and it can inspire women's further political participation. Studies have shown that women's visibility in high office can increase women's overall interest in politics and motivate them to become more politically engaged.⁵ Moreover, increased representation can foster greater societal acceptance of women in politics, which in turn can encourage political elites to nominate, and voters to elect, more women to political positions.

Why positive action measures?

Gender quotas and reserved seats are positive action measures aimed at increasing women's representation in political institutions. They have been deployed as a means to disrupt structural barriers and 'fast track' women's representation, rather than waiting for cultural and socio-economic changes to deliver incremental improvements to women's presence.⁶

While voters are able to decide how many seats a party receives, it is usually primarily the leadership of political parties themselves that decide who these candidates are, thereby acting as 'gatekeepers' of elected office.⁷ In some parties, there is a formalised selection process, but in others, candidates are selected primarily behind closed doors. The latter approach has been criticised for enabling party elites to select candidates from their own networks, often choosing those who either resemble them or demonstrate loyalty, which typically results in the overrepresentation of men. Positive action measures, therefore, are a means to account for (perhaps subconscious) bias at the selection level by enforcing requirements on those in charge of the process, or by creating specific seats for women to help establish greater gender balance.

1 Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1998).

2 IPU, 'Global Data on National Parliaments', 2025, <https://data.ipu.org/>.

3 Kristin Wylie and Pedro dos Santos, 'A Law on Paper Only: Electoral Rules, Parties, and the Persistent Underrepresentation of Women in Brazilian Legislatures', *Politics & Gender* 12, no. 3 (September 2016): 415–442, doi:10.1017/S1743923X16000179; Leslie A. Schwindt-Bayer and William Mishler, 'An Integrated Model of Women's Representation', *Journal of Politics* 67, no. 2 (2005): 407–428, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2508.2005.00323.x; Amanda Clayton and Pär Zetterberg, 'Quota Shocks: Electoral Gender Quotas and Government Spending Priorities Worldwide', *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 3 (July 2018): 916–932, doi:10.1086/697251.

4 Jeffrey A. Karp and Susan A. Banducci, 'When Politics Is Not Just a Man's Game: Women's Representation and Political Engagement', *Electoral Studies* 27, no. 1 (March 2008): 105–115, doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2007.11.009.

5 Angela High-Pippert and John Comer, 'Female Empowerment: The Influence of Women Representing Women', *Women & Politics* 19, no. 4 (September 1998): 53–66, doi:10.1300/J014v19n04_03.

6 Drude Dahlerup and Lenita Freidenvall, 'Quotas as a "Fast Track" to Equal Representation for Women: Why Scandinavia Is No Longer the Model', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7, no. 1 (March 2005): 26–48, doi:10.1080/1461674042000324673.

7 Drude Dahlerup, 'Electoral Gender Quotas: Between Equality of Opportunity and Equality of Result', *Representation* 43, no. 2 (July 2007): 73–92, doi:10.1080/00344890701363227.

Over time, with changing norms and understanding of representation, quotas and reserved seats have increased the targets for the representation of women. Initially, thirty percent women was deemed to be sufficient to achieve a 'critical mass' of women to begin enacting changes that benefit women. The concept of 'critical mass' was an academic idea that came out of a critique of having a few 'token' women in institutions that were male-dominated, instead proposing that a threshold percentage of women was needed for them to be able to enact legislation on behalf of women.⁸ This was proposed at a time when women were largely excluded from politics. However more recent positive action measures have aimed for gender parity of fifty percent women and fifty percent men to better enable a fuller and fairer representation of women. This change has been seen particularly in Latin America and in Europe, with some research showing that the framing of laws as parity, rather than quotas, produced fewer negative responses.⁹

Criticism

The use of positive action measures has often been controversial. While many view them as an effective and necessary tool for aiding women's political representation, critics argue that they violate meritocratic principles. They claim that their use will result in politicians being chosen only because they are women, rather than because they possess the skills or qualifications needed for office. As a result, many women elected through these measures may be perceived as second-class parliamentarians, both by other politicians and the public, even if, in reality, they are equally or better qualified for the position than their (male) counterparts.¹⁰ This came through in an interview with Hon. Julia Gillard, former Prime Minister of Australia. Referring to the period shortly after the introduction of a voluntary party quota in the Australian Labour party, she said:

"It became quite a known interjection to be yelling at newly elected women, 'quota girl' to try and imply that they didn't hold their place on merit."¹¹

Research shows that even how we view political merit may overlook women's talent because politics has been male-dominated for so long.¹²

8 Sarah Childs and Mona Lena Krook, 'Critical Mass Theory and Women's Political Representation', *Political Studies* 56, no. 3 (October 2008): 725–736, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00712.x; Rosabeth Moss Kanter, 'Some Effects of Proportions on Group Life: Skewed Sex Ratios and Responses to Token Women', *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 5 (March 1977): 965–990, doi:10.1086/226425; Drude Dahlerup, 'From a Small to a Large Minority: Women in Scandinavian Politics', *Scandinavian Political Studies* 11, no. 4 (1988): 275–298, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9477.1988.tb00372.x.

9 Vanilda Souza Chaves et al., 'Representing Women in Latin America' (Kings College London, 2024); Hilde Coffé, Saha, Sparsha, and Ana Catalano and Weeks, 'Quotas or Parity? How the Framing of Positive Action Measures Impacts Public Support and Backlash', *Journal of European Public Policy* 0, no. 0 (n.d.): 1–30, doi:10.1080/13501763.2024.2402864.

10 Rainbow Murray, 'Second Among Unequals? A Study of Whether France's "Quota Women" Are Up to the Job', *Politics & Gender* 6, no. 4 (December 2010): 643–669, doi:10.1017/S1743923X1000053X; Rainbow Murray, 'Parity and Legislative Competence in France', in *The Impact of Gender Quotas*, ed. Susan Franceschet, Mona Lena Krook, and Jennifer M. Piscopo (Oxford University Press, 2012), 0, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199830091.003.0002.

11 Interview with Hon. Julia Gillard, May 2025

12 Mona Lena Krook, 'Gender Quotas, Norms, and Politics', *Politics & Gender* 2, no. 1 (March 2006): 110–118, doi:10.1017/S1743923X06231015; Murray, 'Second Among Unequals?'

Positive action measure implementation to date

In 2025, 72 countries worldwide have adopted positive action measures for women in some form. Of which, 18 are Commonwealth countries (see Box 2).¹³ Positive action measures offer the major explanation for the increased representation of women in politics worldwide in the last few decades.¹⁴

The benefits of such measures are not restricted to numerical gains. Research has demonstrated the benefits positive action measures can have on policymaking, for example, by increasing the proportion of legislation addressing women's interests, enhancing women's roles within parliament, and fostering greater respect for women and higher levels of political engagement among women more broadly.¹⁵

This report

This report explores the adoption of positive action measures across the Commonwealth. It brings together academic research, data and information from international organisations such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), with first-hand interviews with women politicians from around the Commonwealth, who offered diverse perspectives and shared their experiences of gender quotas and reserved seats. The views of the interviewees are their own and do not necessarily reflect those of wider organisations to which they belong. A full list of interviewees can be found at the end of the report.

¹³ Data from International IDEA and Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025.

¹⁴ Aili Mari Tripp and Alice Kang, 'The Global Impact of Quotas: On the Fast Track to Increased Female Legislative Representation', *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 3 (March 2008): 338–361, doi:10.1177/0010414006297342.

¹⁵ Minna Cowper-Coles, 'Women Political Leaders: The Impact of Gender on Democracy' (Kings College London, 2020), <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/giwl/assets/women-political-leaders.pdf>.

Positive Action Measures

The way positive action measures work differs across countries and electoral contexts. In general, they specify that a certain number or proportion of legislators, or electoral candidates must be women. There are two broad types of positive action measures as shown in Box 1.

- 1. Legislated Affirmative Action Measures: Equality measures that are mandated in law. Legislated measures typically fall within two distinct subcategories:**
 - a. Reserved Seats: Designate specific seats for women in political institutions that men are unable to contest.**
 - b. Legislated Candidate Quotas: Require that all parties have (at least) a certain proportion of women among the candidates on their list.**
- 2. Voluntary Party Quotas: Adopted voluntarily by individual parties. Specify that (at least) a certain percentage of electoral candidates of that party must be women.**

Box 1

While legislated affirmative action measures typically apply equally across all parties, voluntary party quotas are entirely party-specific. It is up to individual parties to decide how the quotas are designed, if adopted at all.

The main difference between reserved seats and legislated candidate quotas is that while the former stipulates the minimum number of female legislators, candidate quotas only determine the minimum number of female candidates. In other words, although candidate quotas ensure parties select women candidates on their electoral lists, they do not, by any means, guarantee these women will make it into parliament.

Electoral systems and political environments help determine the type of positive action measures that are in place in a country. For example, instability and frequent leadership changes can affect an increase in more significant constitutional changes, such as legislated affirmative action mechanisms.¹⁶ This is likely due to increased engagement with international organisations, such as the United Nations (UN); and changes to traditional gender norms during periods of turmoil. In contrast, voluntary party quotas are more common in longer established democracies, where constitutional structures are deeply entrenched and so internal party reforms, rather than government legislation, tend to be the main drivers of change.

This section outlines how each positive action measure works in practice, using case studies from across the Commonwealth. It highlights supportive factors that were influential in their adoption, the impact of the measures on descriptive and substantive representation as well as any factors which may explain the successes or limitations observed.

¹⁶ Sarah Sunn Bush, 'International Politics and the Spread of Quotas for Women in Legislatures', *International Organization* 65, no. 1 (January 2011): 103–137, doi:10.1017/S0020818310000287; Jennifer Rosen, 'Gender Quotas for Women in National Politics: A Comparative Analysis across Development Thresholds', *Social Science Research* 66 (August 2017): 82–101, doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2017.01.008.

Legislated Affirmative Action Measures

As previously stated, legislative affirmative action measures are attempts to improve women's representation that are mandated by law.

Reserved Seats

Reserved seats work, as the name suggests, by reserving specific seats for women within political institutions that men are unable to contest. Unlike other positive action measures, reserved seats guarantee women's representation in parliament, rather than solely ensuring women's presence on candidate lists. Usually, the seats are divided proportionally between parties in accordance with their share of the vote. The rules for their governance are typically mandated by law or written into a country's constitution.

As of 2025, 27 countries worldwide have adopted reserved seats for women, although their use is predominantly confined to Africa, Asia and the Middle East.¹⁷ Within the Commonwealth, 11 countries have reserved seats.¹⁸

India is set to implement a national-level reserved seat policy in the coming years, mandating that women occupy one-third of seats in the Lower House of Parliament. This policy will take effect after the redrawing of constituency boundaries, which is scheduled to follow the next census.

Commonwealth Countries with Positive Action Measures

Australia	Bangladesh
Cameroon	Gabon
Guyana	India
Kenya	Lesotho
Malta	Pakistan
Papua New Guinea	Rwanda
Sierra Leone	South Africa
Solomon Island	Tanzania
Uganda	United Kingdom

¹⁷ Mona Lena Krook, 'Gender Quotas as a Global Phenomenon: Actors and Strategies in Quota Adoption', *European Political Science* 3, no. 3 (June 2004): 59–65, doi:10.1057/eps.2004.18.

¹⁸ Data from International IDEA and Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025

Table 1 Commonwealth countries with Reserved Seats

Country	% of reserved seats in lower/ single house	% of reserved seats in upper house	% women in parliament at last election
Bangladesh	14		20
Eswatini	30	16	22
India	33		14
Kenya	33	26	23
Pakistan	18	18	16
Papua New Guinea	20		3
Rwanda	30	30	64
Samoa	10		13
Sierra Leone	33		30
Tanzania, United Republic of	30		37
Uganda	25		34

While reserved seats have the benefit of ensuring women are represented, they can be seen as problematic in other ways. One criticism of reserved seats is that, by creating a distinction between those elected in traditionally open contests and those granted a reserved seat, the system can generate the impression that reserved seat women are illegitimately holding power or are there as mere tokens rather than as politicians in their own right. In other words, reserved seats can risk creating a two-tiered system of legislators whereby reserved seat women are perceived unfavourably.

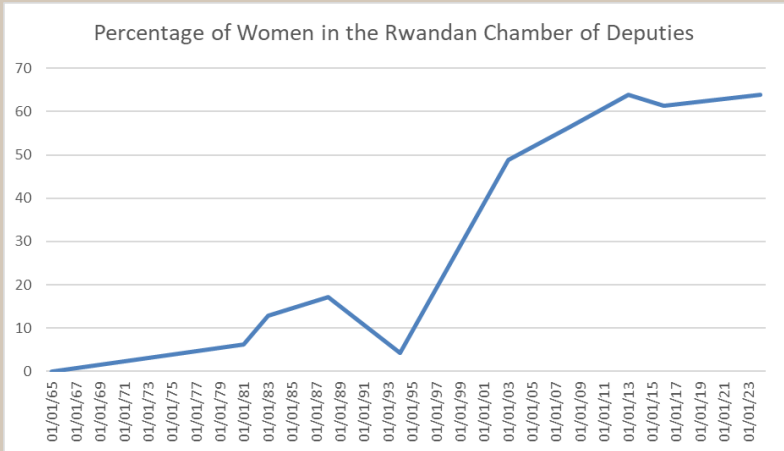
Often, reserved seats operate differently to traditionally elected seats beyond the restrictions on who can stand, they often do not have a particular relationship to a constituency, but instead to a wider area or are given a subject or portfolio to represent. The Hon. Neema Lugangira, a Tanzanian MP with a special seat, explained in an interview that women with special seats from her party represented youth, NGOs, women or other groups, as well as their wider region. She explained that this was sometimes difficult, in terms of demonstrating the impact of their work:

“With special seats, the geographical area is larger. So, at times it’s difficult to pinpoint the impact that you’ve created. A constituency MP just has a small area, every day they wake up, they breathe, they talk about their small area, whereas the special seat MPs are representing the region – for example, the region I come from has eight districts, so this means the female MP has to work across all eight districts... So there is then that detachment in terms of the impact you’re contributing and it’s upon us now, as special seat MPs, to make sure that we communicate our impact.”¹⁹

Additionally, in providing seats that only women can contest, in some cases this can create the impression that traditionally elected seats are by default, men’s seats. This can mean that the policy acts as a ceiling for women’s representation, rather than a floor, where parties do not feel obligated to field women in non-reserved seats.

¹⁹ Interview with Hon. Neema Lugangira, May 2025.

RWANDA

Electoral System	The Rwandan Chamber of Deputies has 80 members. 53 of which are directly elected through closed-list Proportional Representation (PR), and the remaining 27 are indirectly elected.																																																														
Quota information	In 2003, Rwanda adopted a new constitution making it mandatory that 30% of seats are reserved for women in all decision-making bodies, meaning that 24 out of the 80 seats in parliament are reserved for women. In 2007, the representation of women was further boosted through a legal amendment stipulating that party lists must contain at least 30% women candidates. However, this law does not make any provisions for placement mandates.																																																														
Impact on Descriptive Representation	In 2008, the Rwandan Chamber of Deputies reached a worldwide record for the highest female representation, with the number of women deputies standing at 56.2%. Since then, the country has seen further numerical advances, with women currently making up 63.8% of the Chamber of Deputies.  <table border="1"> <caption>Percentage of Women in the Rwandan Chamber of Deputies</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Date</th> <th>Percentage (%)</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr><td>01/01/65</td><td>0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/67</td><td>0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/69</td><td>2</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/71</td><td>4</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/73</td><td>6</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/75</td><td>8</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/77</td><td>10</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/79</td><td>12</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/81</td><td>10</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/83</td><td>15</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/85</td><td>18</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/87</td><td>18</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/89</td><td>15</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/91</td><td>10</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/93</td><td>5</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/95</td><td>10</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/97</td><td>20</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/99</td><td>30</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/01</td><td>40</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/03</td><td>50</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/05</td><td>52</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/07</td><td>55</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/09</td><td>58</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/11</td><td>62</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/13</td><td>65</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/15</td><td>62</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/17</td><td>63</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/19</td><td>63</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/21</td><td>64</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/23</td><td>64</td></tr> </tbody> </table>	Date	Percentage (%)	01/01/65	0	01/01/67	0	01/01/69	2	01/01/71	4	01/01/73	6	01/01/75	8	01/01/77	10	01/01/79	12	01/01/81	10	01/01/83	15	01/01/85	18	01/01/87	18	01/01/89	15	01/01/91	10	01/01/93	5	01/01/95	10	01/01/97	20	01/01/99	30	01/01/01	40	01/01/03	50	01/01/05	52	01/01/07	55	01/01/09	58	01/01/11	62	01/01/13	65	01/01/15	62	01/01/17	63	01/01/19	63	01/01/21	64	01/01/23	64
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Supportive Factors for implementation	The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) came into power in the aftermath of genocide and the destruction of government institutions and the country's infrastructure. In the years that followed, Rwanda's government witnessed a period of reform allowing for the inclusion of not only women but also representatives from other groups such as the youth. ²⁰																																																														
Positive Impacts	Rwanda's equality measures have improved the representation of women's interests. Thanks to the actions of women parliamentarians, Rwanda adopted a law in 2008 to make domestic violence and marital rape illegal, and issues such as women's health and abortion have also been discussed in parliament.²¹ Women's increased representation has also had wider benefits for women. Women have reaped the benefits of "respect from family and community members, enhanced capacity to speak and be heard in public forums, greater autonomy in decision-making in the family, and increased access to education"²²																																																														

20 Ho Sio Fan, 'Research on the Effect of Rwanda Gender Quotas on Political Representation and Optimizing Strategy', ed. M. Md Husin, SHS Web of Conferences 193 (2024): 04012, doi:10.1051/shsconf/202419304012; Jennie E. Burnet, 'Gender Balance and the Meanings of Women in Governance in Post-Genocide Rwanda', African Affairs 107, no. 428 (July 2008): 361–386, doi:10.1093/afraf/adn024.

21 Gretchen Bauer and Jennie E. Burnet, 'Gender Quotas, Democracy, and Women's Representation in Africa: Some Insights from Democratic Botswana and Autocratic Rwanda', Women's Studies International Forum, Democratization and gender quotas in Africa, 41 (November 2013): 103–112, doi:10.1016/j.wsif.2013.05.012.

22 Jennie E. Burnet, 'Women Have Found Respect: Gender Quotas, Symbolic Representation, and Female Empowerment in Rwanda', Politics & Gender 7, no. 3 (September 2011): 303–334, doi:10.1017/S1743923X11000250.

Criticisms	However, the benefits of the reserved seat policy are limited by the persisting patriarchal structure and deep-rooted hierarchies in Rwandan politics and culture more broadly.²³ This, combined with the strength and structure of the ruling party, means that often women MPs moderate ‘female-friendly’ policies in an attempt to keep in line with the RPF, and when conflict arises, women can often be quick to compromise in case they are forced to resign.²⁴ Additionally, the measure has mostly benefited elite women. Reserved seat women are elected to represent specific geographic regions yet often are not from the area they represent. This is primarily because rural areas have fewer opportunities for women with the necessary educational qualifications that would allow them to become a deputy in the first place.²⁵ This fuels an antagonism between elite and rural women, as reserved seat women are likely to “represent men, their self-interest, class interest, and the RPF instead of the whole Rwanda women group”.²⁶
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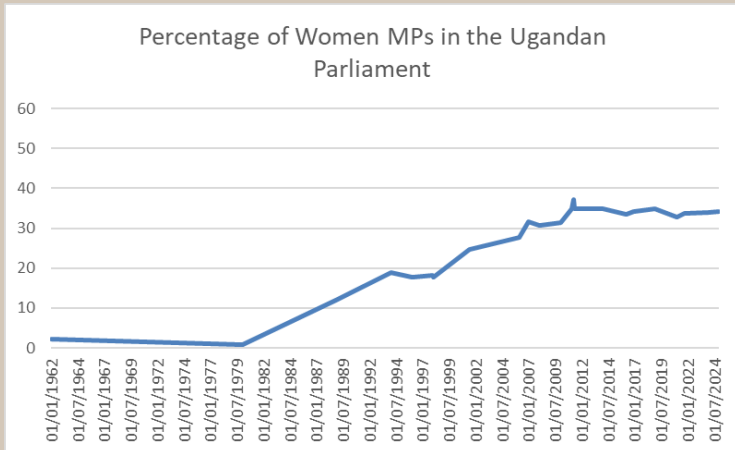
²³ Victoire Ingabire Umuhoza, ‘Rwanda: Seats in Parliament Not Enough to Liberate Women’, openDemocracy, 2023, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/rwanda-women-in-parliament-employment-culture-empowerment/>; Fan, ‘Research on the Effect of Rwanda Gender Quotas on Political Representation and Optimizing Strategy’.

²⁴ Fan, ‘Research on the Effect of Rwanda Gender Quotas on Political Representation and Optimizing Strategy’.

²⁵ Bauer and Burnet, ‘Gender Quotas, Democracy, and Women’s Representation in Africa’.

²⁶ Fan, ‘Research on the Effect of Rwanda Gender Quotas on Political Representation and Optimizing Strategy’, 3.

UGANDA

Electoral System	In Uganda there are 529 MPs, of which 499 are directly elected (353 from single-member constituencies and 146 from reserved seats, otherwise known as 'women's districts') as well as 30 indirectly elected representatives of the youth, disabled, workers, older people, and defence forces. They use a FPTP electoral system.																																																						
Quota information	Uganda was one of the first African countries to introduce equality measures for women, implementing reserved seats as early as 1989. They were first introduced in a top-down manner during a period of the National Resistance Movement (NRM)'s rule. The NRM is led by President Museveni, who has been in office continuously since 1986. In 1995, the policy was incorporated into a revised constitution, whereby, reserved seat women were appointed by a limited male-dominated Electoral College.²⁷ Revisions to the policy were made in 2006 and reserved seat women were directly elected for the first time.²⁸																																																						
Impact on Descriptive Representation	Prior to 1989, there was only one woman in the fifth parliament of Uganda then known as the National Resistance Council (NRC), but following the reserved seat policy, 12.2% of seats were held by women. Today, women's representation stands at 34.1%.  <table border="1"> <caption>Percentage of Women MPs in the Ugandan Parliament</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Date</th> <th>Percentage (%)</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr><td>01/01/1962</td><td>0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/1964</td><td>0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1967</td><td>0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/1969</td><td>0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1972</td><td>0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/1974</td><td>0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1977</td><td>0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/1979</td><td>0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1982</td><td>0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/1984</td><td>0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1987</td><td>0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/1989</td><td>12.2</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1992</td><td>18</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/1994</td><td>18</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1997</td><td>18</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/1999</td><td>25</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2002</td><td>28</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/2004</td><td>30</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2007</td><td>32</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/2009</td><td>32</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2012</td><td>35</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/2014</td><td>35</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2017</td><td>34</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/2019</td><td>35</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2022</td><td>34</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/2024</td><td>34.1</td></tr> </tbody> </table>	Date	Percentage (%)	01/01/1962	0	01/07/1964	0	01/01/1967	0	01/07/1969	0	01/01/1972	0	01/07/1974	0	01/01/1977	0	01/07/1979	0	01/01/1982	0	01/07/1984	0	01/01/1987	0	01/07/1989	12.2	01/01/1992	18	01/07/1994	18	01/01/1997	18	01/07/1999	25	01/01/2002	28	01/07/2004	30	01/01/2007	32	01/07/2009	32	01/01/2012	35	01/07/2014	35	01/01/2017	34	01/07/2019	35	01/01/2022	34	01/07/2024	34.1
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Supportive Factors for implementation	The adoption of reserved seats in Uganda came about primarily due to pressure from women's movements and international organisations; women's increased involvement in society; and political expediency for the President at the time. Women had been involved in the guerrilla war preceding President Museveni coming to power. This was crucial in helping to change the status of women more broadly and generated acceptance for their greater involvement in politics.²⁹ At the same time, the 1985 UN Women's conference in Nairobi inspired Ugandan women to demand their rights and voice their dissatisfaction with their representation in government. Finally, the introduction of reserved seats was seen by President Museveni as a strategic opportunity to gain support among female voters and to strengthen loyalty to his party, the NRM.³⁰																																																						

27 Sylvia Tamale, 'Introducing Quotas: Discourse and Legal Reform in Uganda', in *The Implementation of Quotas: African Experiences*, ed. Julie Ballington (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2004).

28 Wang and Yoon, 'Recruitment Mechanisms for Reserved Seats for Women in Parliament and Switches to Non-Quota Seats'.

29 J. Rubongoya, *Regime Hegemony in Museveni's Uganda: Pax Musevenica* (Springer, 2007), 79; Wang and Yoon, 'Switches from Quota- to Non-Quota Seats'.

30 Sylvia Tamale, *When Hens Begin To Crow: Gender And Parliamentary Politics In Uganda* (New York: Routledge, 1999), doi:10.4324/9780429503085.

Positive Impacts	The increased number of women, resulting from reserved seats, has had benefits in terms of women-friendly policy. The Domestic Violence Act came into force in 2010 and provides protection of victims of domestic violence and punishments for perpetrators. The Act was a landmark event representing the first instance of Uganda passing legislation specifically relating to the domestic sphere. ³¹
Criticisms	The initial reserved seat system was criticised for its top-down nature, with research revealing that the design disproportionately favoured elite, wealthy women who were predominately NRM loyalists.³² Following the 2006 reforms, studies have found that although reserved seat women still tend to be more elite than their female constituents, they are no more elite than their non-quota MP counterparts.³³ Further, critics suggest that the reserved seats have not led to cultural change and the reduced status of women in reserved seats has meant that they have been less able to advance policies to support women, with the Domestic Violence Act being a notable exception.³⁴ This is partly due to wording from the law and partly because women have faced barriers in moving from reserved seats to constituency seats, such as patriarchal culture, gender-based violence during elections, and the higher costs associated with contesting constituency seats. This is further reinforced by the perception that reserved seats are for women, while constituency seats should be left for men.³⁵

31 Josephine Ahikire and Amon Mwiine, 'Contesting Ideas, Aligning Incentives: The Politics of Uganda's Domestic Violence Act (2010)', in *Negotiating Gender Equity in the Global South* (Routledge, 2019), 67–87.

32 Tamale, 'Introducing Quotas: Discourse and Legal Reform in Uganda'.

33 Diana Z. O'Brien, 'Quotas and Qualifications in Uganda', in *The Impact of Gender Quotas*, ed. Susan Franceschet, Mona Lena Krook, and Jennifer M. Piscopo (Oxford University Press, 2012), 0, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199830091.003.0004.

34 Ragnhild L. Muriaas and Vibeke Wang, 'Executive Dominance and the Politics of Quota Representation in Uganda', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 50, no. 2 (June 2012): 309–338, doi:10.1017/S0022278X12000067; Ahikire and Mwiine, 'Contesting Ideas, Aligning Incentives: The Politics of Uganda's Domestic Violence Act (2010)'.

35 Vibeke Wang and Mi Yung Yoon (2018) 'Recruitment Mechanisms for Reserved Seats for Women in Parliament and Switches to Non-Quota Seats'.

PAKISTAN

Electoral System	The National Assembly of Pakistan has 336 Members. 266 of which are elected via a FPTP system, the remaining seats are reserved for women and non-Muslim minorities.
Quota information	Reserved seats in Pakistan are not new. They were first introduced in 1956. Today, the Constitution makes provisions for 60 of the 336 seats in the National Assembly to be reserved for women.³⁶ Prior to an election, every political party must submit a list of women candidates to the Electoral Commission. Following the election, reserved seats are distributed among parties in proportion with their electoral performance. While general FPTP seats have constituencies, for reserved seats each province is a single constituency. Therefore, reserved seat women represent a much larger geographic area.³⁷
Impact on Descriptive Representation	Arguably, the increased presence of women politicians, has perhaps normalised seeing women politicians in the media, which may contribute to the challenging of traditional gender norms in politics and wider society. ³⁸
Positive Impacts	In 2008, a women's caucus was created to unite women across party lines in the National Assembly.³⁹ Additionally, in the 13th Legislature, almost 30% of Private Member's Bills that were introduced by a woman (or group composed of women) directly concerned gender-related issues, such as domestic violence and female workers' rights.⁴⁰
Criticisms	Despite the creation of a women's caucus, research highlights that most women MPs have never been involved in the women's movement in Pakistan and neither do they associate themselves with feminism.⁴¹ In fact, it has been argued that because the reserved seat policy was introduced in isolation, it has not been successful in aiding the rights of marginalised groups in society.⁴² As such, some have argued that the policy has been symbolic, rather than a means of generating real political power for women.⁴³ Additionally, political parties have been reluctant to allocate party tickets to women to contest general seats.⁴⁴ In the 2008 election, for example, the number of women who applied far exceeded the number of nominations parties were willing to grant to women. While many of the rejected female applicants ran as independents, most of them were unsuccessful in winning a seat.⁴⁵ Similarly, in the 2013 election, only 9 women contested general seats and all of them came from influential political families.⁴⁶ Further, the indirect election of reserved seats has been identified as a key factor sustaining women politician's dependence on male party leadership. This, combined with the lack of specific electoral district, limits the opportunity for women to build their own constituency power base, and instead allows women to be selected who are likely to support the ideas of party leadership.⁴⁷

36 'The Constitution of Pakistan', Article 51 (2018), <https://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution>.

37 'The Constitution of Pakistan', Article 51 (2018), <https://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution>.

38 Viginie Dutoya, 'From Women's Quota to "Women's Politics": The Impact of Gender Quotas on Political Representations and Practices in the Pakistani National Parliament', *FEMINA POLITICA* 22, no. 2 (November 2013): 7–8.

39 Dutoya.

40 Dutoya.

41 Dutoya.

42 Sher Muhammad, Nazim Rahim, and Saher Hanif, 'Gender Quota in Pakistan: An Analytical Study', *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 3, no. II (December 2019): 170–186, doi:10.35484/pssr.2019(3-II)03.

43 Saira Bano, 'Women in Parliament in Pakistan: Problems and Potential Solutions', *Women's Studies Journal* 23, no. 1 (2009).

44 Andrea Fleschenberg and Farzana Bari, 'Unmaking Political Patriarchy Through Gender Quotas?', 2015.

45 Bano, 'Women in Parliament in Pakistan: Problems and Potential Solutions'.

46 Fleschenberg and Bari, 'Unmaking Political Patriarchy Through Gender Quotas?'

47 Fleschenberg and Bari.

Legislated Candidate Quotas

Legislated candidate quotas are enshrined in law and require all political parties to follow the same rules when selecting candidates. Typically, these rules stipulate that a certain proportion of each party’s candidates must be women. They may also include placement mandates, which regulate where women must appear on party lists in proportional representation (PR) systems, or specify the types of constituencies where women must be fielded in majoritarian systems, to ensure they are placed in electable positions. Some quota laws also introduce sanctions for non-compliance, such as the rejection of non-compliant candidate lists or financial penalties.

According to IDEA, 71 countries currently use legislated candidate quotas in their lower or single house. Across these countries, the average share of women in parliament stands at 28.9%. These types of quotas are most effective in countries with PR electoral systems.

Although not widely used in the Commonwealth, such measures are common in Latin America. For example, Argentina employs legislated candidate quotas in an attempt to achieve gender parity in the Chamber of Deputies. The measure mandates that women and men are listed in an alternating manner on candidate lists. Since the introduction of the policy, there have been significant female-friendly policy changes, for example an increase in the number of women’s rights bills introduced.⁴⁸ Candidate quotas in Mexico also stipulate the allocation of 50/50 women and men candidates. Consequently, women’s presence in the national parliament has risen from 14% in 1997 to 50% today.⁴⁹

In Europe, Portugal has a legislated quota law requiring a minimum of 40% representation of each sex on party candidate lists. Additionally, the law also stipulates that no more than two consecutive candidates on a list can be of the same sex, helping to ensure gender balance in elected positions.⁵⁰ As of the most recent election in 2024, women comprise 33% of the national legislature. Research indicates that the policy’s benefits extend beyond women’s increased numerical representation, for example it has coincided with greater gender balance of speakers in parliamentary debates.⁵¹

Table 2 Commonwealth countries with legislated candidate quotas

Country	% candidate quota in lower/ single house	% women in parliament at last election
Guyana ⁵²	33%	39%
Lesotho	50%	25%
Malta	40%	28%
Solomon Islands	10%	6%

48 Susan Franceschet and Jennifer M. Piscopo, ‘Gender Quotas and Women’s Substantive Representation: Lessons from Argentina’, *Politics & Gender* 4, no. 3 (September 2008): 393–425, doi:10.1017/S1743923X08000342.

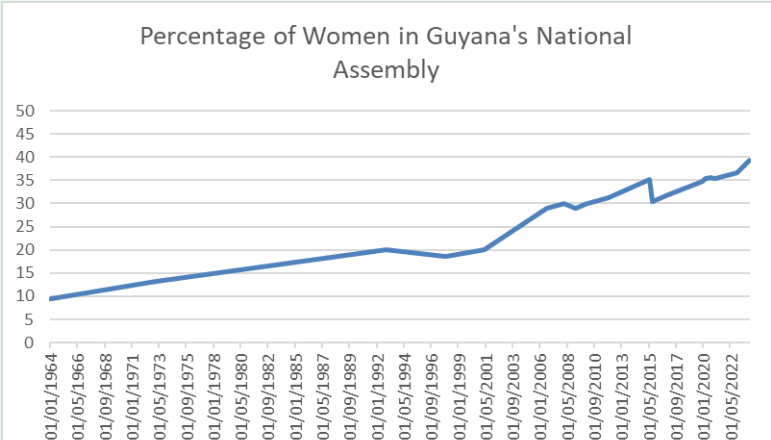
49 World Bank Group, ‘Proportion of Seats Held by Women in National Parliaments (%) - Mexico’, 2024, <https://data.worldbank.org>.

50 Ionel Zamfir, ‘Towards Gender Balance in the European Elections’ (European Parliament, 2023), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/751447/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)751447_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/751447/EPRS_BRI(2023)751447_EN.pdf).

51 Jorge M. Fernandes, Mariana Lopes da Fonseca, and Miguel Won, ‘Closing the Gender Gap in Legislative Debates: The Role of Gender Quotas’, *Political Behavior* 45, no. 3 (2021): 897–921, doi:10.1007/s11109-021-09737-3.

52 IDEA and IPU classify Guyana as having reserved seats, yet we believe, based on academic research, that the policy better fits with the definition of a legislated candidate quota

GUYANA

Electoral System	Guyana has a closed-list, non-prioritised form of proportional representation. This means that parties do not pre-determine their candidate rankings. Therefore, the electorate votes for a party without knowing which candidates will be selected to take the seats.⁵³ The National Assembly is a unicameral legislature of 65 directly elected members. Of which, 25 are elected at the regional constituency level. There are 10 constituencies, and each one is allocated representatives proportional to the population. The other 40 members are drawn from what is called the 'national top-up list'.⁵⁴																																																						
Quota information	Legislated candidate quotas were introduced in 2000, during a period of extensive constitutional reform. Specifically, the Elections Laws (Amendment) Act mandates: 1) that the national top-up list contains a minimum of one-third women 2) the regional list contains one-third women for the constituencies where the party contests 3) the proportion of constituencies that a party may contest with lists containing no female candidate cannot exceed 20% To tackle non-compliance, if a list fails to meet the one-third requirement, it is rejected and must be revised.⁵⁵																																																						
Impact on Descriptive Representation	As of 2025, Guyana ranks 29th in the world for women's representation in parliament at 39.4%.  <table border="1"> <caption>Percentage of Women in Guyana's National Assembly (Estimated Data)</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Date</th> <th>Percentage (%)</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr><td>01/01/1964</td><td>10</td></tr> <tr><td>01/05/1966</td><td>11</td></tr> <tr><td>01/09/1968</td><td>12</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1971</td><td>13</td></tr> <tr><td>01/05/1973</td><td>14</td></tr> <tr><td>01/09/1975</td><td>15</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1978</td><td>16</td></tr> <tr><td>01/05/1980</td><td>17</td></tr> <tr><td>01/09/1982</td><td>18</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1985</td><td>19</td></tr> <tr><td>01/05/1987</td><td>20</td></tr> <tr><td>01/09/1989</td><td>20</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1992</td><td>20</td></tr> <tr><td>01/05/1994</td><td>19</td></tr> <tr><td>01/09/1996</td><td>18</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1999</td><td>19</td></tr> <tr><td>01/05/2001</td><td>20</td></tr> <tr><td>01/09/2003</td><td>25</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2006</td><td>30</td></tr> <tr><td>01/05/2008</td><td>28</td></tr> <tr><td>01/09/2010</td><td>30</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2013</td><td>32</td></tr> <tr><td>01/05/2015</td><td>35</td></tr> <tr><td>01/09/2017</td><td>32</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2020</td><td>35</td></tr> <tr><td>01/05/2022</td><td>39.4</td></tr> </tbody> </table>	Date	Percentage (%)	01/01/1964	10	01/05/1966	11	01/09/1968	12	01/01/1971	13	01/05/1973	14	01/09/1975	15	01/01/1978	16	01/05/1980	17	01/09/1982	18	01/01/1985	19	01/05/1987	20	01/09/1989	20	01/01/1992	20	01/05/1994	19	01/09/1996	18	01/01/1999	19	01/05/2001	20	01/09/2003	25	01/01/2006	30	01/05/2008	28	01/09/2010	30	01/01/2013	32	01/05/2015	35	01/09/2017	32	01/01/2020	35	01/05/2022	39.4
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⁵³ Natalie Persadie, 'Getting to One-Third? Creating Legislative Access for Women to Political Space in Guyana', Politics, Power and Gender Justice in the Anglophone Caribbean: Women's Understandings of Politics, Experiences of Political Contestation and the Possibilities for Gender Transformation IDRC Research Report 106430-001, 2014.

⁵⁴ Persadie.

⁵⁵ Persadie.

Supportive Factors for implementation	Gender quotas were adopted following a period of non-democratic governance (1964-92). Guyana's subsequent democratisation created an entry point for discussions around increasing women's representation.⁵⁶ National and international pressure was also crucial. A small network of women, at the national level, was influential in pushing for quotas. The policy was also influenced by international agreements such as the Beijing Platform for Action.⁵⁷
Positive Impacts	Several women-friendly policies have emerged since the implementation of the quota system. For example, the 2004 Age of Consent Bill, the Sexual Offences Act 2010, and the National Task Force on Domestic Violence 2008.⁵⁸
Criticisms	While parties must put one-third women on their electoral lists, the law stipulates that the extraction of one-third women off the list is discretionary. In other words, this means there is no guarantee that the legislation will translate into one-third women holding seats in parliament. Therefore, the system relies on parties honouring the intent of the law.⁵⁹ It has been noted that various women have recognised they made a mistake in not seeking clarification on the practicalities of implementation.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Persadie.

⁵⁷ Persadie.

⁵⁸ Iman Khan, 'Advancing Gender Justice? The Opportunities, Resistances, and Limitations of Guyana's Quota System', 2014.

⁵⁹ Persadie, 'Getting to One-Third? Creating Legislative Access for Women to Political Space in Guyana'.

⁶⁰ Persadie.

Voluntary Party Quotas

Like legislated candidate quotas, voluntary party quotas do not guarantee women a certain number of seats.⁶¹ Instead, an individual party stipulates that they will nominate a specific percentage of women candidates at a given election. The quota size varies between parties (and countries), but typically the quota lies between 25 percent and 50 percent. Their impact has been acknowledged by scholars Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart as “one of the most important and successful means for getting more women into office.”⁶²

Voluntary party quotas are most commonly adopted in long-standing democracies in the Commonwealth, likely because they do not require amendments to constitutional law. In such democracies, constitutional provisions are typically well-entrenched and difficult to alter. Typically, party quotas are adopted by parties which prioritise gender equality as part of their broader ideological position.

In decentralised systems of selection, local party selectors can, in some cases, act as a barrier to the selection of women candidates.⁶³ They usually select who they view as the ‘best’ representative for their area, often leading to the continued preference for male (incumbent) candidates. Party quotas, therefore, can be used as a tool to bridge the gap between the diversity goals of national party leadership and the preferences of local selectors, ensuring that underrepresented groups are better included in the candidate pool.⁶⁴ However, this can foster resistance among local party elites, who may oppose quota adoption outright or attempt to exploit any loopholes in their design.⁶⁵

Moreover, while quotas can significantly increase the number of women within the adopting party, they rarely lead to any cross-party contagion. As a result, voluntary party quotas may have limited impact on achieving gender parity in national legislatures, especially if the adopting party holds only a minor share of seats. That said, they still play a crucial role in normalising women’s participation.

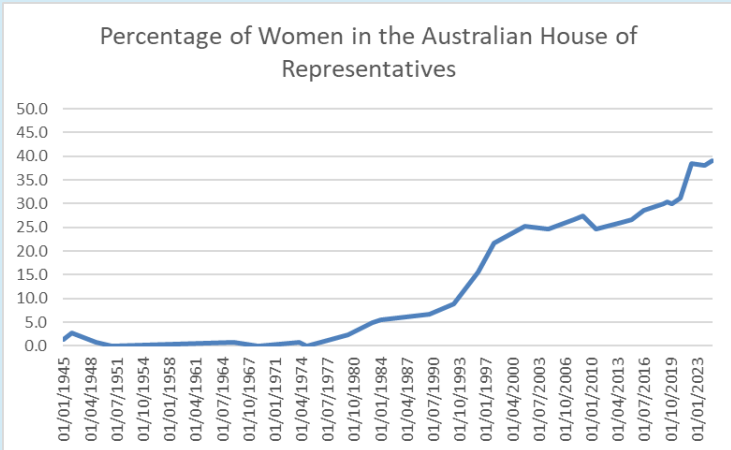
61 Dahlerup, ‘Electoral Gender Quotas’.

62 Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, ‘Women and Democracy: Cultural Obstacles to Equal Representation’, *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 3 (2001): 138.

63 Catherine Durose et al., “Acceptable Difference”: Diversity, Representation and Pathways to UK Politics’, *Parliamentary Affairs* 66, no. 2 (2012): 246–267, doi:10.1093/pa/gss085.

64 Durose et al. ; Rhys Williams and Akash Paun, ‘Party People. How Do - and How Should - British Political Parties Select Their Parliamentary Candidates?’ (Institute for Government, 2011).

65 Saskia Brechenmacher (2024). Subverting Reform: The Politics of Gender Quotas in Kenya’s County Assemblies <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.115784>; Sofia Collignon (2024), Addressing Barriers to Women’s Representation in Party Candidate Selections. *The Political Quarterly* (95) 363-367.

Electoral System	The Australian House of Representatives has 151 members, each representing an electoral district of approximately 165,000 people. MPs are elected by Alternative Vote, where voters must rank all the candidates in order of preference. If a candidate wins more than half of first preference votes they are elected outright. If not, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and the votes for them are transferred to each voter's next preference. This continues until one candidate has a majority of votes, at which point they are elected.																																																				
Quota information	In 1994, the ALP adopted a mandatory 25% selection quota in winnable seats in all elections by 2002.⁶⁶ In 2002, the quota was increased to the 40/40/20 rule, ensuring that 40% of candidates were women, 40% men, and the remaining 20% could be of either gender. By 2015, the ALP adopted a 50% candidate quota, to be implemented by 2025. The quota regulations set out sanctions for non-compliance, whereby if a local party fails to meet the quota requirements, the selections will be overturned, and the nomination process would start again.⁶⁷ The quota relies on intra-party dealmaking: Labor's National Executive categorises seats into safe, winnable, and other groups. If the required number of women is not selected within a category, all contests within that category are re-opened.																																																				
Impact on Descriptive Representation	As a result of quota adoption, women's representation in the ALP has risen significantly, from 14.5% of seats in the 1994 national election to 46% in 2025.  <table border="1"> <caption>Percentage of Women in the Australian House of Representatives</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Date</th> <th>Percentage (%)</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr><td>01/01/1945</td><td>2.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/04/1948</td><td>2.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/1951</td><td>2.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/10/1954</td><td>2.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1958</td><td>2.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/04/1961</td><td>2.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/1964</td><td>2.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/10/1967</td><td>2.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1971</td><td>2.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/04/1974</td><td>2.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/1977</td><td>2.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/10/1980</td><td>5.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1984</td><td>6.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/04/1987</td><td>7.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/1990</td><td>8.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/10/1993</td><td>10.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1997</td><td>22.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/04/2000</td><td>25.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/2003</td><td>25.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/10/2006</td><td>27.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2010</td><td>28.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/04/2013</td><td>27.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/2016</td><td>28.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/10/2019</td><td>30.0</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2023</td><td>46.0</td></tr> </tbody> </table>	Date	Percentage (%)	01/01/1945	2.0	01/04/1948	2.0	01/07/1951	2.0	01/10/1954	2.0	01/01/1958	2.0	01/04/1961	2.0	01/07/1964	2.0	01/10/1967	2.0	01/01/1971	2.0	01/04/1974	2.0	01/07/1977	2.0	01/10/1980	5.0	01/01/1984	6.0	01/04/1987	7.0	01/07/1990	8.0	01/10/1993	10.0	01/01/1997	22.0	01/04/2000	25.0	01/07/2003	25.0	01/10/2006	27.0	01/01/2010	28.0	01/04/2013	27.0	01/07/2016	28.0	01/10/2019	30.0	01/01/2023	46.0
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Supportive Factors for implementation	The ALP's adoption of a gender quota came about due to a number of factors. Primary among them was a vocal campaign by women, of which some were very senior within the ALP. Additionally, the adoption of the quota was supported by the fact that trade unions had recently also adopted quotas, showing that they were taking the initiative to tackle the underrepresentation of women. Further, the support of the then Prime Minister, Paul Keating, helped tip the balance of support for the policy.⁶⁸ Compliance with gender quota rules was also driven by factional party dynamics, where it acted as a strategy to avoid losing seats to rival factions.⁶⁹																																																				

66 Joy McCann and Janet Wilson, 'Representation of Women in Australian Parliaments 2014' (Parliament of Australia, 2014).

67 Sharon Claydon MP, 'Celebrating 30 Years of Affirmative Action', 2024, <https://www.sharonclaydon.com/newsroom/speeches/celebrating-30-years-of-affirmative-action/>.

68 Interview with Hon. Julia Gillard, May 2025

69 Joy McCann and Marian Sawyer, 'Australia: The Slow Road to Parliament', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Women's Political Rights* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2019), 483–502, doi:10.1057/978-1-137-59074-9_33.

Positive Impacts	Although initial reactions to the introduction of quotas included worries about women elected through quotas being less talented than the men they were replacing, research has suggested that the quality of women elected has been successfully demonstrated. ⁷⁰ Further the quotas have changed the culture of Australian politics and led to a changing emphasis in policy making. ⁷¹
Criticisms	The ALP adopted quotas despite some strong internal opposition. However, over time the quotas have largely been successful. The quota policies have not been adopted by the Australian Liberal Party, who criticised the policy for being anti-merit. Instead, the Liberal Party has adopted other strategies to improve the representation of women, such as training schemes, which have been much slower to take effect. As such, the adoption of quotas by the ALP has not fully solved the problem of the underrepresentation of women in Australia's House of Representatives.

70 Katrine Beauregard and Marija Taflaga, 'Party Quotas and Gender Differences in Candidate Experience in Australia: 1987–2016', *Parliamentary Affairs* 76, no. 2 (2021): 360–381, doi:10.1093/pa/gsab061.

71 Interview with Hon. Julia Gillard, May 2025

Electoral System	The UK operates a FPTP electoral system. Candidate selection for the Labour Party occurs within local constituency branches, where aspirants apply, and a shortlist is drawn up by a party committee before being presented to all constituency members.																																																		
Quota information	In 1993 the Labour Party approved the use of 'All-women shortlists' (AWS) for 50% of winnable seats, including both marginal seats and Labour retirement seats. This only applied as long as there were fewer women than men in the Parliamentary Labour Party. The policy was implemented with a sunset clause, a provision in a Bill that gives it an expiry date once it is passed into law. While sunset clauses are not uncommon in UK politics, in this case, it was likely included to appease opposition by framing the policy as a temporary measure.⁷²																																																		
Impact on Descriptive Representation	AWS were first used in the 1997 General Election, resulting in the election of 101 women. The number of women elected to the House of Commons doubled from 9.2% in 1992 to 18.4% in 1997 and now stands at 40%.⁷³ The placement mandates for winnable seats meant that at the 1997 election, women made up 24.2% of elected Labour MPs.⁷⁴ Percentage of Women MPs in the UK House of Commons <table border="1"> <caption>Percentage of Women MPs in the UK House of Commons</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Date</th> <th>Percentage (%)</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr><td>01/07/1945</td><td>2</td></tr> <tr><td>01/11/1948</td><td>2</td></tr> <tr><td>01/03/1952</td><td>2</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/1955</td><td>3</td></tr> <tr><td>01/11/1958</td><td>3</td></tr> <tr><td>01/03/1962</td><td>4</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/1965</td><td>4</td></tr> <tr><td>01/11/1968</td><td>4</td></tr> <tr><td>01/03/1972</td><td>4</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/1975</td><td>4</td></tr> <tr><td>01/11/1978</td><td>4</td></tr> <tr><td>01/03/1982</td><td>4</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/1985</td><td>5</td></tr> <tr><td>01/11/1988</td><td>8</td></tr> <tr><td>01/03/1992</td><td>9</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/1995</td><td>18</td></tr> <tr><td>01/11/1998</td><td>18</td></tr> <tr><td>01/03/2002</td><td>19</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/2005</td><td>19</td></tr> <tr><td>01/11/2008</td><td>22</td></tr> <tr><td>01/03/2012</td><td>22</td></tr> <tr><td>01/07/2015</td><td>31</td></tr> <tr><td>01/11/2018</td><td>33</td></tr> <tr><td>01/03/2022</td><td>40</td></tr> </tbody> </table>	Date	Percentage (%)	01/07/1945	2	01/11/1948	2	01/03/1952	2	01/07/1955	3	01/11/1958	3	01/03/1962	4	01/07/1965	4	01/11/1968	4	01/03/1972	4	01/07/1975	4	01/11/1978	4	01/03/1982	4	01/07/1985	5	01/11/1988	8	01/03/1992	9	01/07/1995	18	01/11/1998	18	01/03/2002	19	01/07/2005	19	01/11/2008	22	01/03/2012	22	01/07/2015	31	01/11/2018	33	01/03/2022	40
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Supportive Factors for implementation	The acceptance of AWS was part of a broader modernisation package for parliamentary selection reform. ⁷⁵																																																		
Positive Impacts	Despite claims that quotas produce 'second-class' parliamentarians, studies of AWS women's parliamentary performance suggest that they perform equally or better than their non-quota colleagues across a range of measures, including across measures of substantive representation. ⁷⁶																																																		
Criticisms	Initially, AWS sparked controversy and legal challenges, with the Labour Party being sued for violating the Sex Discrimination Act. As a result, AWS were not used in the 2001 election, but a 2002 reform to the Act allowed parties to use positive action in candidate selection if women were in the minority in the Parliamentary Labour Party, enabling the Labour Party to resume the use of AWS in the 2005 election.																																																		

72 Sarah Childs, 'The Unfinished Business All Women Shortlists and the UK Parliament: Contagion, Transformation and Extension', SSRN Electronic Journal, 2015, doi:10.2139/ssrn.2625482.

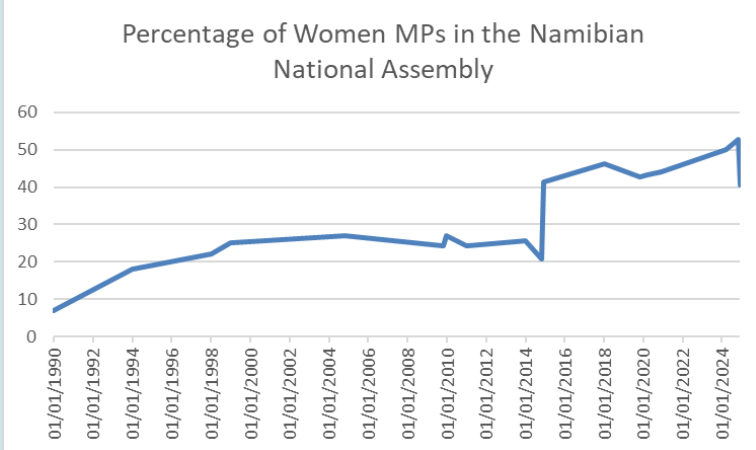
73 Maria Eagle and Joni Lovenduski, 'High Time or High Tide for Labour Women' (London: The Fabian Society, 1998), <https://digital.library.lse.ac.uk/Documents/Detail/high-time-or-high-tide-for-labour-women-1998/120304?item=120306>.

74 Eagle and Lovenduski, 7.

75 Eagle and Lovenduski, 'High Time or High Tide for Labour Women'.

76 Mary K. Nugent and Mona Lena Krook, 'All-Women Shortlists: Myths and Realities', *Parliamentary Affairs* 69, no. 1 (2015): 115–135, doi:10.1093/pa/gsv015; Katherine Shuttleworth, 'Do All-Women Shortlists Produce More Active Parliamentarians? A Comparison of the Parliamentary Activity of Quota and Open-List Labour Women MPs from 2005 to 2017', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 2025, doi:10.1080/17457289.2025.2504872.

NAMIBIAN SOUTH WEST AFRICA PEOPLE'S ORGANISATION (SWAPO)

Electoral System	The Namibian National Assembly is made up of 96 voting members, elected every five years via closed list PR alongside an additional 6 non-voting members appointed by the President. The South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) is the ruling party of Namibia.																																						
Quota information	A 50/50 'zebra style' party list was adopted by SWAPO in 2013 and used for the first time in the 2014 elections.⁷⁷ The closed list system means that parties rank order their candidates. Therefore, women's names cannot be moved downward by voters during an election.																																						
Impact on Descriptive Representation e.g. number of women before and after quota, including graph	 <table border="1"> <caption>Percentage of Women MPs in the Namibian National Assembly</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Date</th> <th>Percentage of Women MPs</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr><td>01/01/1990</td><td>8</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1992</td><td>15</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1994</td><td>18</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1996</td><td>20</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/1998</td><td>22</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2000</td><td>25</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2002</td><td>25</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2004</td><td>26</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2006</td><td>25</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2008</td><td>24</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2010</td><td>25</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2012</td><td>25</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2014</td><td>42</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2016</td><td>45</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2018</td><td>48</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2020</td><td>45</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2022</td><td>48</td></tr> <tr><td>01/01/2024</td><td>50</td></tr> </tbody> </table>	Date	Percentage of Women MPs	01/01/1990	8	01/01/1992	15	01/01/1994	18	01/01/1996	20	01/01/1998	22	01/01/2000	25	01/01/2002	25	01/01/2004	26	01/01/2006	25	01/01/2008	24	01/01/2010	25	01/01/2012	25	01/01/2014	42	01/01/2016	45	01/01/2018	48	01/01/2020	45	01/01/2022	48	01/01/2024	50
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Supportive Factors for implementation e.g. influential advocates, women's movements, international pressure	Several factors have been highlighted to explain the adoption of quotas. SWAPO's loyal voter base, with more than a 2/3 majority, meant there was very little electoral risk for introducing quota measures for women. After decades of women's involvement in the liberation struggle, the party was persuaded by powerful women's lobby groups and women within the party, for example, the SWAPO Party's Women's Council worked in tandem with women's groups such as Sister Namibia and Women Action for Development.⁷⁸ The policy was also influenced by international instruments such as the 1979 UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), The BPfA, and the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development. All of which emphasised that member nations, who ratified these documents, should put in place mechanisms to eliminate gender discrimination and aid women's representation.																																						
Positive Impacts	Afrobarometer survey findings from November 2017 reveal that 59% of Namibians believe that better gender representation in the National Assembly, following quota implementation, has made Parliament more effective. There is also wide support among the public for other parties to adopt similar members, with 69% of Namibians stating that all parties should adopt gender quota policies to ensure 50/50 representation in Parliament.⁷⁹																																						

77 IPPR, 'Ready for 50/50?', Election Watch, no. 4 (2013).

78 Job Shipululo Amupanda and Erika Kahelende Thomas, 'SWAPO's 50/50 Policy in Namibia's National Assembly (2015-2018): Full of Sound and Fury Signifying Nothing?', The Strategic Review for Southern Africa 41, no. 2 (2019), doi:10.35293/srsa.v41i2.304.

79 Nangula Shejavali, 'Though a Leader in Gender Representation, Namibia Still Has Work to Ensure Full Equality' (Afrobarometer, 2018).

Criticisms	Questions have been raised as to whether the effect of the policy has been merely symbolic as there is little evidence that the rise in women's presence has coincided with a shift to a women-friendly parliamentary agenda. During the 2015-18 Parliaments, female parliamentarians tabled only 25% of motions in the National Assembly, despite accounting for 41% of its membership. And it was the opposition female members (of which there were substantively fewer) who tabled most of these motions.⁸⁰ Additionally, in 2017, women's issues were significantly underrepresented in parliamentary questions, with only 3 out of 159 questions during the period addressing topics related to women's issues.⁸¹
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80 Amupanda and Thomas. 'SWAPO's 50/50 Policy in Namibia's National Assembly'

81 Max Weylandt and Ndeapo Wolf, 'Parliamentary Questions in Namibia' (IPPR, 2018), <https://ippr.org.na/publication/parliamentary-questions-in-namibia/>.

Implementing Positive Action Measures

The three ‘types’ of positive action measures all have their strengths and weaknesses. While reserved seats provide a guaranteed number of seats for women, they can invertedly create a ceiling for women’s representation. In countries where there is a more entrenched patriarchal structure, reserved seats can dissuade parties from fielding women in non-reserved seats, thereby creating the perception that traditionally elected seats belong solely to men.

Voluntary and legislated quotas are more likely to lead to women’s representation exceeding the specified quota size. But, if they are poorly enforced, they are likely to provide little help to women at all. Voluntary party quotas, if well enforced and supported by internal party and cultural dynamics, can be very successful but they do not always lead to diffusion to other parties, meaning that if the adopting party has only a minor share of parliament, one may see little improvement in women’s overall representation. Legislated candidate quotas can be the most reliable and effective form of quota for achieving meaningful change, presuming they come alongside robust enforcement mechanisms, as they have no ceiling and do not create a two-tier system where women are seen as second rate candidates.

Implementing an effective positive action measure involves making the most of opportunities, overcoming a number of obstacles, and learning the lessons from elsewhere to ensure that the measure is effective.

Opportunities and Obstacles

Positive action measures are not a one-size-fits-all solution. Their success depends on how well they are designed and embedded within a country’s broader political system. If a quota is implemented without accounting for the institutional framework and electoral system of the country in its original design, the effect will be merely symbolic.⁸²

This section offers a series of tips and questions for policymakers and advocates who want to promote the adoption of gender quotas, not only to achieve increased numerical representation of women but also to achieve substantive representation.

Drawing on experiences from across the Commonwealth, this section identifies the enabling conditions, design considerations and potential challenges that can shape positive action measure outcomes. Rather than prescribing a universal model, it highlights key questions that should be considered to inform policy decisions across an array of political contexts.

It begins by reviewing some of the barriers and pitfalls associated with quotas and reserved seats, before proposing tools to support the adoption of positive action measures and outlining key questions to consider when designing and advocating for such measures.

⁸² Dahlerup, ‘Electoral Gender Quotas’.

Potential Barriers and Pitfalls

Lack of diversity

Gender equality cannot be fully realised if the only women elected are those who are highly educated or from the dominant groups in society. Without specific measures to address intersectional inequalities, positive action measures risk benefiting only a narrow subset of women, reinforcing within-group inequalities and leaving many women excluded from elected positions.⁸³

“[the quota system] is leaving out groups – people living with disabilities, young women, the uneducated – we need a balance of everything. Everyone [should] feel like they are included.”⁸⁴

Concerns about diversity have been voiced in some countries where positive action measures have been adopted. For example, in Rwanda reserved seats have been criticised for promoting elite women to power, with concerns raised over the representativeness of women as a whole.⁸⁵

Sen. Quratulain Marri, a Senator in Pakistan, explained that in instances where a man cannot be accommodated on a general seat, a woman in his family may be offered a reserved seat to then secure his support for a general election, and as a result the reserved seat system can lead to elite women from political families being elected.⁸⁶

Voluntary party quotas have also received criticism for lack of diversity. Diane Abbott, the first UK black female MP, famously criticised the Labour Party’s use of All-Women Shortlists (AWS) as being equivalent to “all-white-women shortlists”.⁸⁷ However, subsequent research has challenged this narrative, showing that in the UK, women from Black and minority ethnic (BAME) groups were actually selected at high rates in AWS seats than in open selections. At the 2015 election, 16.1% of women selected were BAME compared to only 2.9% BAME representation among both men and women (combined) in open seats.⁸⁸

Improving transparency of selection procedures is crucial for making quotas more inclusive. Ensuring that selection processes are open and clearly communicated is essential to widening access, not only for women generally, but for a diverse selection of women.⁸⁹ It should not be the case that only a select few, elite, women are aware of opportunities to stand as a candidate. In some cases where inequalities are even more entrenched, additional quotas might be useful, for example for the representation of indigenous populations in Latin America, or for the lower castes in India.

Failure to address other obstacles to women entering politics

Positive action measures attempt to address the demand-side explanations of women’s underrepresentation. However, even with equality measures in place, women may still encounter substantial obstacles limiting or discouraging them from competing for office.

83 Karen Celis et al., ‘Quotas and Intersectionality: Ethnicity and Gender in Candidate Selection’, *International Political Science Review* 35, no. 1 (January 2014): 41–54, doi:10.1177/0192512113507733.

84 Interview with Sen. Fezeka Dlamini, May 2025

85 Bauer and Burnet, ‘Gender Quotas, Democracy, and Women’s Representation in Africa’; Fan, ‘Research on the Effect of Rwanda Gender Quotas on Political Representation and Optimizing Strategy’.

86 Interview with Sen. Quratulain Marri, June 2025

87 Andrew Gimson, ‘Sketch: The All-White-Women Shortlists’, *The Telegraph*, April 2009, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/5195686/Sketch-the-all-white-women-shortlists.html>.

88 Nugent and Krook, ‘All-Women Shortlists’.

89 Eagle and Lovenduski, ‘High Time or High Tide for Labour Women’.

Where political spaces remain dominated by men, women may lack supportive political networks that can encourage them to stand for office. Politics has traditionally been, and often continues to resemble, a 'boy's club' meaning women are less likely to have access to the connections that can encourage and support their candidacy. Expanding access to training and mentoring schemes can help women build these vital political networks, while also equipping them with the skills and confidence necessary to pursue elected office.

Financial barriers also persist, with the gender pay gap, women's generally weaker socio-economic standing, and the unequal division of labour limiting their access to the funding needed for election campaigns. These barriers are typically even more pronounced in FPTP electoral systems which, because of their all-out nature, typically have higher campaign costs than PR contests. As such, women often cannot match the funds that male candidates are able to invest in their campaigning.⁹⁰

The cost of campaigning was raised in several interviews as a key barrier for women. Sen. Marri noted that the high expense of contesting a general seat, combined with the fact that most women in Pakistan lack financial independence from their families, is a key reason why few women hold general seats in the National Assembly and are instead largely confined to reserved seats.⁹¹

Additionally, the burden of unpaid care work, particularly childcare, which still disproportionately falls on women, reduces the time and flexibility needed to campaign, especially when running for office carries no job security.

Further, Sarah Boyack, a Scottish Labour Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP), highlighted that the timings of Parliamentary sittings can often be incompatible with these caring commitments. She shared that votes can often go into the evening and often with limited forewarning, which can be difficult to plan caring responsibilities around.⁹²

It is important to take action to lower the additional burden for women, so they do not have to choose between a career in politics and having a family. Specific efforts should be made to make childcare compatible with political life, for example ensuring access to childcare provisions on the parliamentary estate as well as maternity and paternity leave policies. Additionally, efforts should be made to increase the predictability of scheduling in Parliament, and, where possible, the timings of sittings should be confined to traditional business hours.⁹³

More widely, Hon. Katya De Giovanni, a Member of the House of Representatives of Malta, encourages a cultural shift in the gender roles that are passed on to children. She suggested the need to teach boys that they can be emotional, and girls that they can hold leadership positions. She argues that cultural change of this kind is far more important for enabling meaningful progress for women than any positive action measure.⁹⁴

The threat of discrimination and harassment further discourages women from putting themselves forward as political candidates. In many cases, the media only exacerbates the unequal treatment of women politicians, with women facing increased scrutiny and discriminatory framing compared to their male counterparts. In the UK, media intrusiveness into women's private lives was described by

90 Tamale, 'Introducing Quotas: Discourse and Legal Reform in Uganda'.

91 Interview with Sen. Quratulain Marri, June 2025

92 Interview with Sarah Boyack MSP, June 2025

93 Sarah Childs, 'The Good Parliament Report' (University of Bristol, 2015), <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/news/2016/july/20%20Jul%20Prof%20Sarah%20Childs%20The%20Good%20Parliament%20report.pdf>.

94 Interview with Katya De Giovanni, June 2025

an All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Women in Parliament Report as a factor in discouraging women from standing for political office.⁹⁵

“If a man makes a mistake, it will be forgotten very quickly because he is a man.”⁹⁶

Many of the interviewees referenced issues of harassment and abuse towards female politicians. Sen. Fezeka Dlamini, a Senator in Eswatini, discussed the issue of unregulated social media for women politicians, particularly highlighting the comments made online about women politician’s bodies and appearances.⁹⁷ Sarah Boyack MSP highlighted that social media has made politics more challenging for women and has been a key factor discouraging them from entering politics.⁹⁸ Hon. Katya De Giovanni also noted the discriminatory and derogatory remarks directed at women politicians by their male colleagues, often focusing on their appearance or of a sexual nature.⁹⁹

It is important to consider what support can be given to protect women from violence and abuse, particularly online. One option, as adopted in the Scottish Parliament is to have a social media monitoring team that monitors abuse so that appropriate action can be taken to protect women.¹⁰⁰

Entrenched patriarchal culture and tokenism

“The greatest obstacle to change is the conception that the existing political structures are the natural order of things”¹⁰¹

While positive action measures can accelerate women’s numerical presence, they do not necessarily lead to broader societal acceptance or approval of women as political leaders.¹⁰²

Quotas alone cannot establish a truly gender-equal democracy if the wider institutional culture remains hierarchical and patriarchal. Simply increasing the number of women legislators is unlikely to dismantle the structural barriers that limit their influence and effectiveness. Without addressing underlying discrimination and gendered norms within institutions, women elected through quotas may continue to face marginalisation, tokenism, and resistance.¹⁰³

Voluntary party quotas in Namibian SWAPO, for example, although widely supported and heralded as a success, have not led to an increase in substantive issue-raising or agenda setting for women.¹⁰⁴

Additionally, while quotas can advance women’s overall presence in legislatures this may not translate into women gaining ministerial positions within parliament itself. Katya De Giovanni shared that, despite the gender corrective mechanism, only 2 of the 17 Ministers in Malta are female.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Sarah Boyack MSP stated that although there is fairly equal gender representation in the Shadow Cabinet in Scotland, this is not the case in parliamentary committees.¹⁰⁶

95 APPG Women in Parliament, ‘Improving Parliament. Creating a Better and More Representative House’ (APPG Women in Parliament, 2014).

96 Interview with Hon. Nomathemba Mokgethi, June 2025

97 Interview with Sen. Fezeka Dlamini, May 2025

98 Interview with Sarah Boyack MSP, June 2025

99 Interview with Katya De Giovanni, June 2025

100 Interview with Sarah Boyack MSP, June 2025

101 Drude Dahlerup, *Has Democracy Failed Women?*, Democratic Futures Series (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 35, <http://politybooks.com/bookdetail/?isbn=9781509516360>.

102 Rosen, ‘Gender Quotas for Women in National Politics’.

103 Tamale, ‘Introducing Quotas: Discourse and Legal Reform in Uganda’.

104 Amupanda and Thomas, ‘SWAPO’s 50/50 Policy in Namibia’s National Assembly (2015-2018)’.

105 Interview with Katya De Giovanni, June 2025

106 Interview with Sarah Boyack, June 2025

Further, positive action measures, even when they meet their target for women's representation, may do little to advance women's access to traditionally elected open seats. In Uganda, for example, although reserved seats have boosted women's representation, they remain the primary path into politics. Open constituency seats remain just as inaccessible due to a traditionally male-dominated political culture, high campaign costs, and gendered discrimination that discourage women from running. Regarding the Pakistan National Assembly, where few women hold general seats, Sen. Marri stated:

"I would like to believe the initial thought behind reserved seats for women was so that women could get the space they needed to make the general constituencies. It hasn't happened."¹⁰⁷

In some cases, where quotas are established as a top-down quota initiative, it may create a situation where quota-elected women feel beholden to the state or perceive themselves to have been elected as a favour, rather than a right. For example, the initial Ugandan quota policy was criticised for its top-down nature which largely served to favour women who were NRM loyalists¹⁰⁸

To counter this, women's movements are crucial. It is important for women to establish autonomous organisations can maintain a critical distance from national elites, enabling them to effectively challenge the inequalities embedded within the political institutions themselves.¹⁰⁹ Women's movements can also empower women to behave as women rather than emulating masculine power.

"As women we get into [politics] and we want to be seen as very strong women... we want to act as men. But we do not need that. You want to come in and just be a woman, just be you...be soft, allow all that. Don't try to be someone else."¹¹⁰

Perceptions of quota women as second-class representatives

Reserved seats and other positive action measures can create the perception that women elected through them are inferior parliamentarians. In Uganda, where few MPs from reserved seats go on to contest open constituency seats, the policy has contributed to the entrenchment of the idea that open seats are 'male seats,' further reinforcing the notion that women in reserved seats are second-class politicians.

Hon. Julia Gillard shared that:

"[it is] the implication that if you use a mechanism like quotas, you'll get substandard candidates – that more talented men have been pushed aside by less talented women. But we've been at this long enough in Australia now to completely put a lie under that...the proof of it is there for all to see"¹¹¹

Hon. Neema Lugangira believes that assumptions of inferiority often stem from ignorance about the process. In Tanzania, she explained, many people assume that special seat women are simply appointed by party leaders. Yet, in reality, she faced intense competition for her seat, even running

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Sen. Quratulain Marri, June 2025

¹⁰⁸ Tamale, 'Introducing Quotas: Discourse and Legal Reform in Uganda'.

¹⁰⁹ Tamale, 'Introducing Quotas: Discourse and Legal Reform in Uganda'.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Sen. Fezeka Dlamini, May 2025

¹¹¹ Interview with Hon. Julia Gillard, May 2025

against women with ministerial experience.¹¹² Similarly, Hon. Mokgethi, an ANC member of the Gauteng Provincial Legislature in South Africa, said that:

“there will be those men that will try to make you feel like you are not worth this position.”¹¹³

Nevertheless, it is essential to ensure that the pathways into politics provided by quota systems do not diminish the importance of women’s hard work, and that information about these policies is communicated transparently so the public is fully informed.

In her interview, Hon. Katya De Giovanni revealed that voters would often say they would not vote for her because “you will be included with the [gender corrective] mechanism anyway.” In her view, this lowers the incentive to work hard to get elected and has contributed to many women’s negative perceptions of the policy.¹¹⁴

“It must not be like they are doing a favour for us when they say we give you a special seat.”¹¹⁵

In addition, the perceived legitimacy of women elected through quotas can also be shaped by the design of positive action measures. In Pakistan, for example, the indirect election process for reserved seats often means that women ‘represent’ larger geographical areas but have smaller support bases compared to those elected to general seats. This system can further limit their independence, as they may become more reliant on political parties whose internal structures and agendas are often patriarchal. As a result, women elected through reserved seats may be viewed as less legitimate or influential than their directly elected counterparts, which can undermine their ability to advocate effectively for their constituents.¹¹⁶

However, in her interview, Sen. Marri highlighted that, contrary to these perceptions, women politicians generally work harder, perhaps to prove themselves, and are actually the ones passing the most legislation.¹¹⁷ Similarly, in the UK, quota women in the Labour Party have been observed to perform equally, if not better, in Parliament than non-quota women of the same party across a variety of parliamentary activities.¹¹⁸

Hon. Neema Lugangira noted that, in Tanzania, when positive action women represent large areas or lack a defined constituency, it can be challenging for them to demonstrate their impact and achievements.¹¹⁹ This may further reinforce public perceptions of positive action women being less effective or legitimate representatives.

One strategy to potentially aid the perception of women politicians, raised by Hon. Neema Lugangira is to support women in taking full advantage of social media and strengthening their online presence to help demonstrate their impact as politicians.¹²⁰

¹¹² Interview with Hon. Neema Lugangira, May 2025

¹¹³ Interview with Hon. Nomathemba Mokgethi, June 2025

¹¹⁴ Interview with Hon. Katya De Giovanni, June 2025

¹¹⁵ Interview with Hon. Nomathemba Mokgethi, June 2025

¹¹⁶ Fleschenberg and Bari, ‘Unmaking Political Patriarchy Through Gender Quotas?’

¹¹⁷ Interview with Sen. Quratulain Marri, June 2025

¹¹⁸ Shuttleworth, ‘Do All-Women Shortlists Produce More Active Parliamentarians? A Comparison of the Parliamentary Activity of Quota and Open-List Labour Women MPs from 2005 to 2017’; Nugent and Krook, ‘All-Women Shortlists: Myths and Realities’

¹¹⁹ Interview with Hon. Neema Lugangira, May 2025

¹²⁰ Interview with Hon. Neema Lugangira, May 2025

How to push for positive action measures to be adopted?

Before considering the specific design features that make positive action measures effective, it is essential to understand the conditions that create a conducive environment for their adoption. The introduction of quotas or other positive action measures can often provoke strong opposition. However, there are several strategies that women across the Commonwealth can employ to build momentum and overcome resistance to change.

Mobilise women's movements and civil society

Advocacy by women's movements and civil society organisations can play a key role in putting positive action measures onto the political agenda. These groups can both mobilise public support and exert direct pressure on decision-makers through lobbying and strategic campaigning.¹²¹

Cross-party coalitions of women are particularly effective at drawing attention to the issue of women's underrepresentation and, in doing so, can raise the opportunity cost for political elites choosing to oppose positive action measures. Male politicians may support quotas not necessarily out of personal conviction or a desire to claim credit, but to avoid being punished electorally.¹²² Strong mobilisation by women's groups can create a reputational risk for political actors seen to obstruct gender parity reforms, for fear of being cast as sexist or out of touch with public sentiment.¹²³

The importance of women's mobilisation, and in particular the work of women's caucuses and key feminist actors was emphasised repeatedly in the interviews. Hon. Nontembeko Boyce, Hon. Nobulumko Nkondlo and Hon. Mokgethi all stressed the importance of pressure from the women's wing of the their party, African National Congress (ANC), in mobilising support for the quota policy.¹²⁴ In Pakistan, Sen. Marri shared that Fatima Jinnah, sister of Muhammed Ali Jinnah, the founder and first governor-general of Pakistan, was very active in mobilising and rallying women and was a key figure in getting wider support positive action legislation.¹²⁵ The ALP, according to Hon. Julia Gillard, also responded to a feminist contingent within its ranks which was demanding the introduction of quotas.¹²⁶

Sen. Marri further highlighted the importance of lobbying being persistent and with sufficient aggression, using the media to reinforce the argument wherever possible.

“Something only happens once there's enough pressure behind it, [when] there's enough public support for it. If the people start feeling the need for more women representation, parliament will respond to that need. It's all about supply and demand. If you don't demand more women...the parliament isn't going to be pushed to add them.”¹²⁷

Hon. Nobulumko Nkondlo also stated the importance of women being united around a shared purpose when introducing quota measures. Quotas should not be implemented solely to increase the numerical presence of women but should serve as a tool to address the broader issues women face in society. She

¹²¹ Dahlerup, Has Democracy Failed Women?

¹²² Lisa Baldez, 'Elected Bodies: The Gender Quota Law for Legislative Candidates in Mexico', *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2004): 231–258, doi:10.3162/036298004X201168.

¹²³ R. Kent Weaver, 'The Politics of Blame Avoidance', *Journal of Public Policy* 6, no. 4 (October 1986): 371–398, doi:10.1017/S0143814X00004219.

¹²⁴ Interview with Hon. Nontembeko Boyce, June 2025; Interview with Hon. Nobulumko Nkondlo, June 2025; Interview with Hon. Nomathemba Mokgethi, June 2025

¹²⁵ Interview with Sen. Quratulain Marri, June 2025

¹²⁶ Interview with Hon. Julia Gillard, May 2025

¹²⁷ Interview with Sen. Quratulain Marri, June 2025

argued that without a common goal to improve women's lives from the outset, the impact of quotas is likely to remain symbolic:

"In my party we've got the 50:50, but when we consider the situation of women - poverty, inequality and unemployment - we still have a very long road. It may be because we have not necessarily gone into the very reality of why we want women's empowerment. ...[The situation] must change for an ordinary woman in terms of access to public services. There must be that change. If there isn't, then what's the point?"¹²⁸

Base calls for action on international agreements and regional diffusion

Global gender norms can help legitimise the use of positive action measures by framing them as internationally accepted standards of democratic practice. Political leaders may be motivated to adopt such measures not solely based on domestic demand, but also to align with shifting international expectations and demonstrate compliance with global norms. Some of the key measures are set out in Box 3.

International frameworks supporting the introduction of positive action measures

Key UN frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) call on states to improve the representation of women, while the ECOSOC Resolution 1990/15 calls for a minimum of 30 percent women in leadership positions and UN General Assembly Resolution 66/130 urges states to review electoral systems and to adopt measures such as gender quotas, trainings and reforms to improve the representation of women.

Regional frameworks have also been key. The Council of Europe – such as through Recommendation Rec(2003)3 - supports constitutional safeguards, reforms to electoral law and quotas with sanctions for non-compliance. In Africa, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Gender and Development Declaration, the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, and the African Union (AU) Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa all explicitly call on signatory states to implement mechanisms that promote women's political participation and eliminate gender-based discrimination. For example, the SADC Protocol sets out that "State Parties shall endeavour that, by 2015, at least fifty percent of decision-making positions in the public and private sectors are held by women including the use of affirmative action measures".¹

Non-binding commitments also help to shift norms, the Women's Forum in the margins of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Malta 2015 sent a 'Clear message to leaders to take urgent action getting more women into decision-making roles' and that ' Voluntary targets, legally enforced quotas and reserved seats' should be enforced.² More recently, the 2022 IPU Kigali Declaration on gender equality and gender-sensitive parliaments has also served as a key milestone in pushing for gender parity in political decision making as well as an end to gender-based violence.³

1 SADC, 'SADC Protocol on Gender and Development', Article 12 (2008).

2 <https://thecommonwealth.org/news/it-time-quotas-and-targets-women-leaders>

3 IPU, 'Kigali Declaration. Gender Equality and Gender-Sensitive Parliaments as Drivers of Change for a More Resilient and Peaceful World' (Kigali, Rwanda: IPU, 2022), <https://www.ipu.org/news/press-releases/2022-10/ipu-member-parliaments-commit-accelerating-gender-equality>.

Box 3

These commitments provide both an incentive and justification for gender reforms and have been cited as significant influences in multiple cases of quota adoption. Hon. Nontembeko Boyce told us about the importance of both the Nairobi and Beijing Conference for women in encouraging women to unite for greater political representation for women.¹²⁹ Similarly, when speaking about the BpfA, Hon. Neema Lungangira said that the current President of Tanzania was amongst the people who went to Beijing and, upon her return, was one of the people at the forefront of pushing for change within the party.¹³⁰

In addition to top-down pressure from international organisations, regional diffusion has also played a notable role. Across Africa and South America, in particular, there is evidence of a contagion effect, whereby countries have adopted similar quota policies in quick succession.¹³¹ This trend is supported by cross-border norm-sharing and information exchange, which helps create a sense of regional momentum. Moreover, when neighbouring countries increase women's representation, political leaders may choose to adopt positive action measures to avoid appearing regressive by comparison.¹³² In this way, diffusion becomes a strategic response to shifting international expectations.

Ensure gender equality is prioritised in constitutional change, democratisation and in post-conflict settlements

Post-conflict and transitional contexts can disrupt social structures and create opportunities for the expansion of women's roles in politics for several interconnected reasons.

Countries in these situations often rely heavily on foreign aid and support, giving them strong incentives to adopt internationally recognised models of governance that include gender-inclusive provisions.

¹³³ Accordingly, positive action measures may be introduced as a way to signal a commitment to democratic principles and to secure ongoing international support.

During periods of conflict or transition, women frequently assume expanded roles both within the household and in public life, which can empower them to pursue political participation during and after the post-conflict settlement.¹³⁴ For example, in Uganda, some women took on new responsibilities to support their households during a period of guerrilla war and many became more active in political life. These shifts had lasting impacts and were instrumental in securing women's inclusion in post-conflict governance structures.¹³⁵

Finally, countries going through a process of democratisation that involves rewriting constitutions or undergoing other key institutional changes, allows gender equality measures to be institutionalised from the outset, and often in more progressive ways.¹³⁶ During constitutional negotiations in South Africa, which brought about the political settlement to apartheid, women from across the political spectrum united to form the Women's National Coalition (WNC). The WNC brought together over 100 women's organisations to draw up a charter on women's rights and it opened the debate on gender equality in the country. It was during these discussions that the ANC's Women's League understood the need to bring in affirmative action measures to address the underrepresentation of women in politics.¹³⁷

129 Interview with Hon. Nontembeko Boyce, June 2025

130 Interview with Hon. Neema Lugangira, May 2025

131 Gretchen Bauer and Hanna E. Britton, *Women in African Parliaments* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), doi:10.1515/9781626371255.

132 Tripp and Kang, 'The Global Impact of Quotas'.

133 Bush, 'International Politics and the Spread of Quotas for Women in Legislatures'.

134 Melanie M. Hughes and Aili Mari Tripp, 'Civil War and Trajectories of Change in Women's Political Representation in Africa, 1985–2010', *Social Forces* 93, no. 4 (June 2015): 1513–1540, doi:10.1093/sf/sov003.

135 Aili Mari Tripp, *Women and Politics in Uganda* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2002).

136 Persadie, 'Getting to One-Third? Creating Legislative Access for Women to Political Space in Guyana'.

137 Mavivi Myakayaka-Manzini, 'Political Party Quotas in South Africa' (IDEA, 2003), https://www.aceproject.org/ero-en/topics/parties-and-candidates/CS_South_Africa_Manzini-final2-6-2004.pdf.

The intersection of international pressure, shifting gender roles and constitutional reform, therefore, creates a conducive environment for the adoption of positive action measures in transitional and post-conflict settings.

Build on examples from other political parties or major organisations

The adoption of voluntary party quotas can emerge as a strategic decision shaped by inter-party competition. Political leaders may choose to adopt quotas in an attempt to appeal to female voters, particularly during periods of electoral uncertainty.¹³⁸ Leaders may also be influenced by other political parties or organisations that have already adopted quotas, because they have established a precedent for them, or so as not to appear outdated in comparison.

For the ALP, the prior adoption of affirmative action quotas within the trade union movement encouraged greater acceptance for introducing gender quotas within the ALP, according to Hon. Julia Gillard.¹³⁹

However, just because one influential party adopts a voluntary quota, it does not mean that other parties will adopt the same policy, as was the case in both Australia, South Africa, and the UK. Although, in both the UK and Australia, the measures did coincide with other, gentler, reforms from opposing parties. This has mostly taken the form of training and mentoring schemes which, although productive and meaningful, tend produce much slower change. Hon. Julia Gillard shared:

“The conservatives knew that they had a ‘woman problem’, but they described quotas as anti-merit and so they adopted other strategies, training, mentoring, women’s networks, that kind of thing. It’s had some effect. They have seen an increase in the number of women over time, but it’s not had a quick effect. Labor’s had the much more dramatic uplift, whereas the conservatives have had slow change.”¹⁴⁰

Intra-party conflicts can also be significant in why a party’s leadership might choose to adopt quotas. Internal conflict between a party’s national leadership and the local party branches, for example, might incentivise national party elites to centralise control over candidate selection through the introduction of quotas or reserved seat mechanisms, in order to (re)gain control over the party’s candidate pool.¹⁴¹

Emphasise the importance of gender equality in ideological positions of a party

Most party quotas have been adopted by parties with progressive or more egalitarian political values.¹⁴² In fact, research indicates that more pro-equality values within a political party significantly increase the likelihood that they will adopt a quota sooner.¹⁴³ Advocates of change can emphasise these values when pushing for the adoption of positive action measures.

¹³⁸ Tamale, When Hens Begin To Crow; Ana Catalano Weeks, ‘Why Are Gender Quota Laws Adopted by Men? The Role of Inter- and Intraparty Competition’, *Comparative Political Studies* 51, no. 14 (December 2018): 1935–1973, doi:10.1177/0010414018758762.

¹³⁹ Interview with Hon. Julia Gillard, May 2025

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Hon. Julia Gillard, May 2025

¹⁴¹ Weeks, ‘Why Are Gender Quota Laws Adopted by Men?’

¹⁴² Mona Lena Krook, Joni Lovenduski, and Judith Squires, ‘Gender Quotas and Models of Political Citizenship’, *British Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 4 (October 2009): 781–803, doi:10.1017/S0007123409990123.

¹⁴³ Miki Caul, ‘Political Parties and the Adoption of Candidate Gender Quotas: A Cross-National Analysis’, *The Journal of Politics* 63, no. 4 (November 2001): 1214–1229, doi:10.1111/0022-3816.00107.

Gain the support of leaders

Finally, gaining the support of (typically male) political leaders has been crucial for many countries in adopting quotas and reserved seats. In the Namibian SWAPO, for example, the President's support for getting more women on candidate lists was a key factor in the adoption process. In Eswatini, the King's support for the inclusion of women in politics, and his appointment of women to political positions, such as Eswatini's first ever female Deputy Prime Minister, were instrumental in the adoption of positive action measures.¹⁴⁴

Hon. Neema Lugangira also suggested that having political will from the top was a major factor in ensuring special seats were adopted. She said:

"I think Tanzania, politically, has always had political will for women to be in parliament. This goes back to our founding father...who made sure in the very early years of cabinet that there were positions for women...as a result of that political will, it wasn't difficult to transition and make an amendment within the constitution."¹⁴⁵

Similarly, Sarah Boyack MSP and Hon. Julia Gillard shared that support from party leaders was particularly influence in establishing the quota mechanisms within their parties.

"The then Prime Minister, a man called Paul Keating, put his thumb on the scale and said that he supported it. If he hadn't done that, I think it would have been a much narrower thing as to whether or not it got through. But once he said he wanted it, then ... if you don't do it, you look like you are repudiating the Prime Minister. So, there's a very different, and more weighty, political dynamic at play than repudiating a bunch of women activists"¹⁴⁶

Engaging with other progressive men within the party is also crucial. Hon. Nobulumko Nkonldo stated that once these progressive men begin to appreciate the true value of having women leaders, they can then share these ideas with their counterparts within 'boy's club' style discussions that women are typically excluded from.¹⁴⁷

Effective Design

An effective quota needs to be compatible with the electoral system, and the rules on the ranking of candidates or shortlisting system needs to be established and have rigorous enforcement mechanisms.¹⁴⁸ Across the globe there have been numerous examples of quotas which did not have the intended effect because of poor design. A striking example is in Brazil where a 30% legislative candidate quota exists, yet the percentage of women parliamentarians remained about half that for years before reaching 18% more recently.¹⁴⁹ This gap has been attributed to the quota's failure to

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Sen. Fezeka Dlamini, May 2025

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Hon. Neema Lugangira, May 2025

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Hon. Julia Gillard, May 2025

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Hon. Nobulumko Nkondlo, June 2025

¹⁴⁸ Dahlerup, 'Electoral Gender Quotas'; Leslie A. Schwindt-Bayer, 'Making Quotas Work: The Effect of Gender Quota Laws On the Election of Women', *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2009): 5–28, doi:10.3162/036298009787500330.

¹⁴⁹ IDEA, 2025

account for systemic disadvantages in the political system, and parties exploiting loopholes.¹⁵⁰ Through asking the following questions, advocates of change can work out the most effective type of measure to introduce in their country context.

Countries rarely have the opportunity to redesign their entire electoral system, and cultural changes are slow to take place, so quotas must be designed with these limits in mind.

What is the intended percentage of women?

Quota size, when referring to candidate and party quotas, denotes the minimum percentage of a party's candidates who must be female. While specific targets vary across countries and political parties, a thirty percent threshold is the most common internationally. In recent years, however, discussions have increasingly shifted towards gender parity, aiming for an equal split of fifty percent women and fifty percent men.

In theory, larger quota sizes should yield higher levels of women's parliamentary representation. However, because these quotas apply to candidate lists rather than guaranteed seats in the legislature, the quota size does not directly translate into elected representation. As a result, in many cases, positive action measures produce lower number of women in parliament than specified by the quota size. Even parity quotas may result in limited gains if women are placed in unwinnable constituencies or low down on party lists.

Quota size, therefore, is a necessary but insufficient condition on its own for increasing women's representation. To be effective, positive action measures must incorporate additional design features such as placement mandates and enforcement mechanisms to ensure that policies result in tangible gains in elected office.

With reserved seats, there is more control over the percentage of women that will be guaranteed a place in parliament. However, there are concerns that a high proportion of reserved seats may create the perception that these seats are the only ones intended for women, and often holders of these seats are not deemed as powerful or legitimate as the holders of open seats. Thus, the intended proportion of women needs to be carefully considered against the impact it might have on women's representation elsewhere.

How will the quotas be enforced and women be enabled to gain the seats?

For party and legislated candidate quotas, placement mandates are critical in ensuring that the numerical target established by positive action measures translates into real gains in legislatures. Placement mandates refer to the specific rules governing where women appear on electoral lists or shortlists. In the absence of such rules, parties may technically comply with quota regulations whilst still undermining their effectiveness. For instance, by placing women at the bottom of party lists or only nominating them in unwinnable constituencies, parties are fielding sufficient women candidates but with very little benefit to women's chances of electoral success.¹⁵¹

"Placement mandates and sanctions for noncompliance should act not so much on their own, but to reinforce the percentage of women required by the quota."¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Teresa Sacchet, 'Why Gender Quotas Don't Work in Brazil? The Role of the Electoral System and Political Finance', *Colombia Internacional*, no. 95 (July 2018): 25–54.

¹⁵¹ Jennifer M. Piscopo, 'States as Gender Equality Activists: The Evolution of Quota Laws in Latin America', *Latin American Politics and Society* 57, no. 3 (October 2015): 27–49, doi:10.1111/j.1548-2456.2015.00278.x.

¹⁵² Schwindt-Bayer, 'Making Quotas Work', 14.

The function and necessity of placement mandates varies depending on the electoral system in place. In majoritarian single-member district (SMD) systems, they are typically designed to ensure women are selected in winnable constituencies. For example, the UK Labour Party's All-Women Shortlists mandated that fifty percent of the party's winnable seats, defined as either target or retiring Labour Seats, would exclusively select female candidates.

In list-based proportional systems, placement mandates ensure that women are listed in electable positions on party lists. In closed-list PR systems, where parties determine the rank order of candidates and voters select their preferred party rather than individual candidates, placement mandates have a direct mechanical effect on outcomes.¹⁵³ In open-list PR systems, where voters are able to express preferences for individual candidates within their preferred party, although placement mandates may appear inapplicable, research suggests that psychological effects, such as voter biases towards candidates listed at the top of the ballot, can still influence election results.¹⁵⁴ Placement mandates can, therefore, affect women's access to office in PR systems through both mechanical and psychological mechanisms, depending on the institutional context.¹⁵⁵

Even with strong placement mandates, poor enforcement can make quotas act more as recommendations than binding rules for parties. In other words, it relies on parties being willing to comply. To ensure effectiveness, quotas must be supported by clear sanctions for non-compliance. The most effective sanctions give electoral authorities clear power to reject candidate lists which fail to meet quota requirements.¹⁵⁶ Within the ALP, non-compliance can lead the National Executive to cancel candidate selections. Combined with internal factional dynamics, this threat encouraged early compliance with quota rules, as factions sought to avoid losing seats to rivals within the party.¹⁵⁷

Financial penalties, however, are typically less effective. This is because the largest and wealthiest parties, which usually win the most seats, can often afford to pay the fine instead of complying with the rules. For instance, in France's 2002 elections, parties were fined for not meeting parity laws, but many chose to accept these fines rather than replace male incumbents with female candidates, and as a result only 12.3% of those elected were women.¹⁵⁸

However, it's also important to consider the political consequences of relying too heavily on sanctions. Overly punitive measures may create resistance to quotas, and to women's representation more broadly, making long-term progress harder to achieve.¹⁵⁹

153 Diego Sanches Corrêa and Vanilda Souza Chaves, 'Gender Quotas and Placement Mandates in Open and Closed Lists: Similar Effects, Different Mechanisms', *Electoral Studies* 66 (August 2020): 102157, doi:10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102157.

154 Jonathan Gs Koppell and Jennifer A. Steen, 'The Effects of Ballot Position on Election Outcomes', *The Journal of Politics* 66, no. 1 (February 2004): 267–281, doi:10.1046/j.1468-2508.2004.00151.x; Schwindt-Bayer, 'Making Quotas Work'.

155 Corrêa and Chaves, 'Gender Quotas and Placement Mandates in Open and Closed Lists'.

156 Drude Dahlerup and Lenita Freidenvall, 'Judging Gender Quotas: Predictions and Results', *Policy & Politics* 38, no. 3 (July 2010): 407–425, doi:10.1332/030557310X521080.

157 McCann and Sawyer, 'Australia'.

158 Rainbow Murray, 'Why Didn't Parity Work? A Closer Examination of the 2002 Election Results', *French Politics* 2, no. 3 (December 2004): 347–362, doi:10.1057/palgrave.fp.8200063.

159 Joel Blaxland, 'Negative Sanctions Don't Work (Mostly): An Analysis of Gender Quota Sanctions in Africa', *Party Politics*, February 2025, 13540688251320625, doi:10.1177/13540688251320625.

How will laws be worded?

The way positive action measures are drafted can significantly shape how they are interpreted and applied. Ambiguous or poorly crafted language can allow for interpretations that undermine the intended goal of promoting women's political representation. Legislators, or party officials in the case of voluntary party quotas, need to ensure that the specified minimum threshold does not end up functioning as a ceiling.

“when a law is couched in terms of ‘at least one of the offices ... shall be held by a female’ ... in practice, they are usually interpreted to mean ‘the maximum number’. This inadvertently creates a glass ceiling, making it impossible for women’s representation to rise above the stated quota.”¹⁶⁰

In the case of Guyana’s legislated candidate quotas, after quota laws were enacted, many women recognised they had made a mistake by not seeking clarification on the practicalities of quota implementation.¹⁶¹ As a result, the extraction of one-third women from the party lists remains discretionary, relying on political parties’ willingness to honour the law’s intent, rather than follow a clearly defined and regulated mandate to do so.¹⁶² This case underscores the importance of ensuring that language is not only precise but also explicit about enforcement, to prevent any ambiguity that can be exploited.

How long will the quotas last?

“I do believe the quota system must remain in place until we reach a point where there is equal representation”¹⁶³

While the principle of gender equal representation should be permanent, positive action measures have taken different approaches. Some advocate for quotas or reserved seats to be embedded in the constitution, as something immovable and so not open to easy renegotiation as political parties come and go from government.

“Make sure it is enshrined, it shouldn’t be left to whoever is in office...there has never been any party who has tried to go against it [reserved seats], it’s like a no brainer...it’s not something you can introduce once”¹⁶⁴

However, for some voluntary party quotas, having a sunset clause or statement that the policy would only remain in place until equality is reached, can make adopting these measures more appealing to those with objections as they are seen as temporary, rather than permanent measures.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁰ Tamale, ‘Introducing Quotas: Discourse and Legal Reform in Uganda’, 42.

¹⁶¹ Persadie, ‘Getting to One-Third? Creating Legislative Access for Women to Political Space in Guyana’.

¹⁶² Persadie.

¹⁶³ Interview with Sen. Fezeka Dlamini, May 2025

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Hon. Neema Lugangira, May 2025

¹⁶⁵ Sarah Childs, ‘The Unfinished Business All Women Shortlists and the UK Parliament’

How can women candidates be supported more broadly?

Beyond introducing positive action measures, targeted support for women politicians and candidates is essential. Training with public speaking, the legislative process, and social media as well as practical steps to protect women from abuse and harassment and economic support would all be helpful for women entering politics.

In the UK, Labour women MPs have cited training schemes such as the Labour Women's Network and the Jo Cox Women in Leadership programme as vital for encouraging and preparing them to stand for Parliament.¹⁶⁶ In Canada a parliamentary twinning programme between young women and parliamentarians is encouraging young women to enter politics through a mentoring scheme.¹⁶⁷ The importance of training and mentorship programmes was highlighted in the interviews. Sarah Boyack MSP, for example, stated that training schemes are helpful not only for valuable skills such as public speaking, but also to share knowledge about safety measures available for women politicians.¹⁶⁸ Sen. Fezeka Dlamini also advocated for training programmes for women whereby they can shadow other women politicians, allowing them to feel comfortable in the system.

Tackling gendered harassment is a key challenge to overcome. Threats of violence undermine women's freedom of political expression and is often perpetuated in an attempt to silence women and dissuade them from standing as candidates.¹⁶⁹ Harassment was cited as a key problem facing women politicians and candidates in a number of our interviews, including by Hon. Neema Lugangira and Sen. Fezeka Dlamini.¹⁷⁰

Social media platforms, whilst offering a great opportunity for wider political engagement, are increasingly being used to perpetuate online harassment and abuse. According to an IPU report, 60% of the women parliamentarians surveyed across the Asia-Pacific have been the target of image-based abuse, hate speech, disinformation, or unwanted disclosure of personal data online.¹⁷¹ In many cases, image-based abuse is of a sexual nature, with a rise in Artificial Intelligence (AI) deepfake pornographic content which is fabricated and disseminated without the woman's knowledge.¹⁷²

Establishing mechanisms to protect women against abuse will help support and encourage women throughout their campaign and time in office. One option would be to make gendered harassment an electoral offence as has been done in countries such as Bolivia, Peru, Argentina and Tanzania.¹⁷³

Efforts should also be made to reduce the costs of running for office, or to provide financial support to women candidates. Sen. Fezeka Dlamini gave an insight into the economic barriers women face to run for the House of Assembly in Eswatini despite positive action efforts to increase women's representation.¹⁷⁴

166 Dr Leah Culhane and Jemima Olchawski, 'Women's Experiences of Selection and Election in UK Parliament', 2018, <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/strategies-for-success>.

167 CWP Regional Strengthening Funds Idea's Repository <https://www.cpahq.org/our-networks/commonwealth-women-parliamentarians/cwp-gender-strengthening-funds/cwp-regional-strengthening-funds-idea-s-repository/>

168 Interview with Sarah Boyack MSP, June 2025

169 IPU and CPA, 'Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in the Asia-Pacific Region', March 2025, <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2025-03/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-in-parliaments-in-asia-pacific-region>.

170 Interview with Hon. Neema Lugangira, May 2025; Interview with Sen. Fezeka Dlamini, May 2025

171 IPU.

172 AFP, "'Form of Violence': Across Globe, Deepfake Porn Targets Women Politicians', France 24, January 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250106-form-of-violence-across-globe-deepfake-porn-targets-women-politicians>.

173 Interview with Hon. Neema Lugangira, May 2025

UN (2021) Guidance Note: Preventing violence against women in politics, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2021/Guidance-note-Preventing-violence-against-women-in-politics-en.pdf>

174 Interview with Sen. Fezeka Dlamini, May 2025

“The whole word needs to admit...we’re not starting at the same starting point as men...campaigns are very, very expensive...we need policies that are going to be easier on women...men have always been at an advantage, be it in jobs and money, it is very hard to start a campaign if you’re a woman...the biggest hurdle is finance”¹⁷⁵

Similarly, support for women with childcare or other caregiving responsibilities can make running for office more accessible to a broader range of women, rather than just those who can afford to pay for such services.

Another common piece of advice within the interviews was the need to encourage younger women into politics. Sen. Fezeka Dlamini also stated that when she first decided to enter politics and she wants to see this change.¹⁷⁶ To do encourage this change, Hon. Boyce and Hon. Nkondlo both emphasised the need for intergenerational discourse for the sharing of experiences and ideas among women. It is important, Hon. Nkondlo said, for women to be shown that they can succeed in ‘non-traditionally feminine’ areas, such as politics.¹⁷⁷ Sen. Fezeka Dlamini also calls for education more broadly to normalise and generate acceptance of women leaders.

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Sen. Fezeka Dlamini, May 2025

¹⁷⁶ Interview with Sen. Fezeka Dlamini, May 2025

¹⁷⁷ Interview with Nontembeko Boyce, June 2025; Interview with Nobulumko Nkondlo, June 2025

Conclusion and Recommendations

Finally, the selection and election process must be fully transparent to both aspiring candidates and the public. This ensures that opportunities to stand are accessible to all women, not just those with powerful networks, and helps to reinforce the legitimacy and merit-based nature of quota contests.

The evidence throughout this report shows the impressive legacy of the implementation of quotas and other positive action measures to increase the representation of women in politics. For example, Rwanda, now the global leader in women's parliamentary representation, increased its share of women from 18% to 63.8% using reserved seats.

Beyond the numbers, the case studies and interviews illustrate how these measures can coincide with more women-friendly policy-making. Hon. Nobulumko Nkondlo, for example, shared that just by having women in the room, it can allow for women's perspectives to be considered when discussing societal issues.

"Now we are becoming bolder to say that 'you've got nothing there that speaks to women'. And when we're doing oversight, let's be intentional and inclusive."¹⁷⁸

In Uganda, the introduction of the reserved seat policy was followed by the landmark Domestic Violence Act, which provided protections for victims and penalties for perpetrators. In Tanzania, the adoption of special seats paved the way for policies supporting women's health, wellbeing, and workplace rights, including improved maternity leave.¹⁷⁹ Similarly, in Pakistan, Sen. Marri noted that positive action measures have encouraged pro-women legislation, such as provisions for daycare centres, expanded parental leave, and protections against workplace harassment.¹⁸⁰

"They champion everything that will accelerate the social economic development for women and children... there have been a lot of policy changes... we were able to get an amendment in the law for women who have premature babies, for the maternity leave to start when the baby would have been full term...similarly issues of access to water, issues of girls education, women's rights in the mining sector...access to sanitary pads for women in prison... it's the special seat MPs who are driving [it]...access to healthcare...childcare, issues of gender based violence, access to legal aid".¹⁸¹

Positive action measures have also generated cultural shifts, especially in patriarchal societies. By helping to catapult women into power, where they have then demonstrated their ability and aptitude, these measures have helped change perceptions, with women increasingly being seen as legitimate and capable leaders. In Tanzania, for example, reserved seats have contributed to the diversification of traditional perceptions of power, where women are now encouraged to stand in constituency, as well as reserved, seats. Hon. Neema Lugangira shared:

"We have a high performing female president and a high performing female speaker. That is changing the narrative of society in terms of women, women in leadership and the acceptability of taking women in constituency seats."¹⁸²

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Hon. Nontembeko Boyce, June 2025

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Hon. Neema Lugangira, May 2025

¹⁸⁰ Interview with Sen. Quratulain Marri, June 2025

¹⁸¹ Interview with Hon. Neema Lugangira, May 2025

¹⁸² Interview with Hon. Neema Lugangira, May 2025

In the Australian Labor Party, the success of the quota policy has helped to entrench the norm of selecting women candidates and has contributed to the feminisation of parliament as an institution. Hon. Julia Gillard shared that the quotas have shifted cultural attitudes within Parliament, making it more acceptable for men to take time off around the birth of a child, as they see women parliamentarians doing the same. The increased presence of women politicians, she said, has helped reduce the perception that taking family leave is unusual or a sign of weakness. She also explained that, thanks to the quota policy, the selection of women candidates has become a normalised and accepted practice within the ALP:

“In the early years [of the affirmative action rules] there were people out with their rule book and puzzling through. Now all these years later...it’s just so embedded that there’s no need for anybody to go and clutch their rule book to work out whether they’re in compliance or not... I think it’s a sort of shock that makes the system re-gear and change...then the change is self-sustaining”¹⁸³

This shift in culture is not just limited to the confines of parliament. In Rwanda, the benefits of reserved seats have extended to greater respect and autonomy for women within the family unit.¹⁸⁴ Similarly, Sen. Fezeka Dlamini, for example, suggested that the introduction of reserved seats in Eswatini has improved the respect bestowed to women and children, with a new law being introduced to protect children from child marriages.

“When women lead...economies thrive... we have so much to offer our countries. Allow young women into the systems, give them the opportunity”¹⁸⁵

This report also highlights several important factors for the initial adoption and continued compliance with positive action measures. International support, through organisations and commitments, can play a critical role in promoting the norm of gender equality across regions and help set clear targets for women’s presence in decision-making bodies. A key example that emerged repeatedly in the interviews is the BPfA adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. This landmark document outlined a comprehensive plan for achieving gender equality across multiple areas, including addressing violence against women and increasing women’s participation in leadership and decision-making roles.

Further, strong mobilisation to apply pressure on decision-makers has been a key driver behind the adoption of positive action measures in many of the countries featured in this report. Securing the support of political leaders is also likely to play a significant role in advancing these initiatives.

To ensure success, positive action measures must be carefully designed to align with the specific political context. These are not one-size-fits-all solutions. Thoughtful consideration is essential to ensure they complement a country’s broader political system. In established democracies, where electoral laws are firmly entrenched, voluntary party quotas are often the most viable and widely accepted option, as seen in successful cases like the United Kingdom and Australia. In contrast, younger democracies have greater flexibility to introduce legislative reforms, which helps explain the more frequent use of legislated candidate quotas and reserved seats in developing and post-conflict countries.

¹⁸³ Interview with Hon. Julia Gillard, May 2025

¹⁸⁴ Burnet, ‘Women Have Found Respect: Gender Quotas, Symbolic Representation, and Female Empowerment in Rwanda’

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Sen. Fezeka Dlamini, May 2025

Additionally, policies and laws must be carefully worded and designed to avoid unintended consequences. The wording of these policies should be carefully crafted to prevent any interpretation that the quota size is a maximum limit, rather than a minimum requirement, ensuring quotas do not inadvertently become a ceiling on women's representation. Effective enforcement mechanisms, such as the rejection of non-compliant party lists, should also be established to ensure adherence. Furthermore, placement mandates are crucial to guarantee that women are positioned in electable spots, rather than being relegated to the bottom of candidate lists.

Efforts should also be made to ensure positive action measures make politics accessible to a diverse group of women, rather than an elite few. To support this, it is recommended that selection processes be as transparent as possible and that opportunities to stand for election are widely publicised, rather than limited to small political networks.

It is also important to recognise that while positive action measures, when carefully designed and effectively enforced, can be a reliable way to 'fast-track' women's political representation, they should not be implemented in isolation. Instead, they must be part of a broader package of supportive measures for women. A parliament that genuinely represents women's interests requires not only greater female representation but also a fundamental cultural shift.

To support the feminisation of political culture, it is recommended that additional measures such as legislation addressing gender-based violence and abuse, expanded training opportunities, broader support for caring responsibilities, and, where possible, limiting parliamentary sitting hours to traditional working times.

Finally, active efforts should also be made to establish cross-party women's caucuses. As Hon. Boyce emphasised, it is essential for women to unite across party lines so that when gender-related bills arise, they can mobilise collectively in support, hold each other accountable, and advance shared goals to support women in wider society.¹⁸⁶

Quotas and positive action measures are powerful tools for equal political representation and can have far reaching impacts on national and global policies. Building on recommendations and lessons from across the Commonwealth, this report aims to outline best practice for the use and implementation of quotas and positive action measures.

"It's an important argument to be restating in a world where there's so much ridiculous anti-DEI rhetoric. You know these mechanisms are effective and work."¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Hon. Nontembeko Boyce, June 2025

¹⁸⁷ Interview with Hon. Julia Gillard, May 2025

List of Interviewees

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- Sarah Boyack MSP - Scotland
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- Hon. Julia Gillard – Australia
- Hon. Katya De Giovanni – Malta
- Hon. Neema Lugangira – Tanzania
- Sen. Quratulain Marri – Pakistan
- Hon. Nomathemba Mokgethi – Gauteng Provincial Legislature, South Africa
- Hon. Nobulumko Nkondlo – Western Cape Provincial Parliament, South Africa

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