

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

Information Brief



The Commonwealth



## Introduction



The current Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005–2015 (PoA)<sup>1</sup> and post-2015 Commonwealth gender priorities draw on international commitments for the realisation of women’s rights enshrined in CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Sustainable Development Goals, 2030, UN Security Resolution 1325 and follow-up resolutions, and other agreements on health and education targets. The millennium development goals and other international instruments have been catalysts to increase the representation of women in leadership roles and decision-making positions by 2015. The United Nations and the Commonwealth Secretariat have committed to assisting their member countries to reach gender equality within the proscribed time frame. International organisations, development institutions and civil society have also contributed to reaching these global commitments. The PoA recommends member countries achieve

---

1 See The Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005–2015. Commonwealth Secretariat. Available at [http://www.thecommonwealth.org/Internal/33902/38116/poa\\_2005\\_2015/](http://www.thecommonwealth.org/Internal/33902/38116/poa_2005_2015/)

a target of no less than 30% of women in decision-making in the political, public and private sectors by 2015, the Commonwealth still faces a steep challenge in reaching this target.

## Current situation of women in leadership positions

As at August 2015, a lack of gender balance in decision-making positions in governments still persist. Global statistics reveal that women continue to be under-represented in national parliaments, only 22 per cent of all national parliamentarians were female, a slow increase from 11.3 per cent in 1995<sup>2</sup>. The share of women among Ministers now averages at 17%<sup>3</sup>. The highest positions are even more elusive; as of August 2015, 11 women served as Head of State and 13 served as Head of Government.<sup>4</sup> Five are currently from Commonwealth countries: *Prime Ministers' Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh, Portia Simpson-Miller of Jamaica, and Saara Kuugongelwa Amadhila of Namibia, and Presidents' Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca of Malta and Ameenah Gurib-Fakim of Mauritius*.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, HM Queen Elizabeth II have been represented by women Governor-Generals in Antigua and Barbuda, Australia, The Bahamas, Barbados, Canada, Grenada, New Zealand and St Lucia.<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy to share the significance of the first female Chair of the Commonwealth, Prime Minister Persad Bissessar of Trinidad and Tobago in 2010, who handed over to another female leader, the Prime Minister Gillard of Australia in 2011.

---

2 UN Women 'Facts and Figures: Leadership and Political Participation' 9 November 2015 accessed from <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures#sthash.7rmPyfTV.dpuf>

3 Ibid. November 2015 accessed from <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures#sthash.7rmPyfTV.dpuf>

4 Ibid. November 2015

5 Female World Leaders Currently in Power accessed from [http://www.filibustercartoons.com/charts\\_rest\\_female-leaders.php](http://www.filibustercartoons.com/charts_rest_female-leaders.php)

6 Ibid.

---

From 2010–2014, women leaders were re-elected and/or appointed as Deputy/Vice Presidents in Bangladesh, Dominica, Guyana, Kiribati, Malawi, Mauritius, Singapore, Trinidad and Tobago, and recently Zambia.<sup>7</sup> Many women have held Ministerial positions beyond Gender portfolios, such as Foreign Affairs, Finance, Defence, Environment, Public Service, Energy, Justice, etc., positions which have been traditionally held by men. The political appointments of women in cabinets as ministers is varied across the Commonwealth. Figures below mirror appointment of female cabinet ministers in Commonwealth countries.

## Commonwealth Female Cabinet Ministers, 2011-15

Africa region		European region	
Botswana	13%	Cyprus	9%
Cameroon	35%	Malta	7%
Ghana	30%	United Kingdom	30%
Kenya	33%		
Lesotho	23%		
Malawi	17%		
Mauritius	12%		
Mozambique	19%		
Namibia	35%		
Nigeria	28%		
Rwanda	35%		
Seychelles	23%		
Sierra Leone	7%		
South Africa	46%		
Swaziland	25%		
Tanzania	45%		
Uganda	37%		
Zambia	20%		
		Pacific Region	
		Australia	5%
		Fiji	20%
		Kiribati	15%
		Nauru	17%
		New Zealand	39%
		Papua New Guinea	3%
		Samoa	7%
		Solomon Islands	0%
		Tonga	8%
		Tuvalu	0%
		Vanuatu	0%

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

Asia Region		Caribbean Region	
Bangladesh	35%	Antigua and Barbuda	8%
Brunei-Darussalam	0%	Bahamas	27%
India	8%	Barbados	15%
Malaysia	6%	Belize	10%
Maldives	17%	Canada	50%
Pakistan	0%	Dominica	13%
Singapore	6%	Grenada	29%
Sri-Lanka	4%	Guyana	25%
		Jamaica	20%
		St Kitts and Nevis	13%
		St Lucia	15%
		St Vincent & Grenadines	11%
		Trinidad & Tobago	36%

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

A number of women were also appointed as Speaker or Deputy Speaker of Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament. There are only 46 Women Speakers out of the 190 Parliaments globally, and 19 are from the Commonwealth.<sup>8</sup>

---

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

# Commonwealth Women Speakers, September 2015

## Africa region

Botswana (National Assembly)  
Lesotho (National Assembly)  
Mozambique (Assembleia da Republica)  
Mauritius (National Assembly)  
Rwanda (Chamber of Deputies)  
South Africa (National Assembly)  
Swaziland (Senate)  
Uganda (Parliament)  
United Republic of Tanzania (Bunge)

## Caribbean region

Bahamas (Senate)  
Barbados (Senate)  
Dominica (House of Assembly)  
Trinidad and Tobago (Senate)

## Asia region

Bangladesh (Jatiya Sangsad)  
India (Lok Sabha)  
Singapore (Parliament)

## Europe Region

United Kingdom (House of Lords)

## Pacific region

Australia (House of Representatives)  
Fiji (Parliament)

---

The Commonwealth is making giant strides towards mainstreaming gender. In September 2015, 53 countries had achieved the 30% global target in lower and upper houses of parliament, 18 countries are from the Commonwealth, namely: Antigua and Barbuda, Australia, Belize, Cameroon, Canada, Grenada, Guyana, Mozambique, Namibia, New Zealand, Rwanda, Seychelles, Singapore, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda and United Kingdom. Rwanda still tops the list with parliament consisting of 64% women, closely followed by Seychelles with 44% and South Africa with 42%.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the Africa region ranks high in the number of women in governance, followed by the Caribbean and Asia regions. Even though the number of women in parliament is growing, women's representation still remains at 22% of seats occupied by women.

Women's parliamentary representation remains very weak in the Pacific Island States. Women represent an average of 4.2% of all elected representatives in the Pacific region, a dismal figure in contrast to other regions of the world. In 2010, a few women leaders were selected as potential candidates and served as members of parliament in Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu.<sup>10</sup> Notably, Kiribati's Vice President, Teima Onorio, is the country's only female MP and first female cabinet member in 26 years<sup>11</sup>. In 2012, three female MPs joined the Solomon Islands National Parliament, similarly, in Papua New Guinea, three women won open seats into parliament.

Across the Commonwealth, women have played critical roles in local governance. Female elected councillors and mayors are under-represented in all regions of the world. Following

---

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

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

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

---



constitutional amendments to reserve one-third of all local government seats for women in India and Bangladesh, over one million women have been elected to India's Panchayat Raj and Bangladesh's Upazila Parishad<sup>12</sup>. Women's representation in local governments has fared better. 'Research on panchayats (local councils) in India discovered that the number of drinking water projects in areas led by female-led councils was 62 per cent higher than in those with male-led councils.'<sup>13</sup> Australia, Canada, Lesotho,<sup>14</sup> Namibia,<sup>15</sup> New Zealand<sup>16</sup>, South Africa<sup>17</sup> and Uganda<sup>18</sup> have reached the global target of 30% of women at the local government level.

- 
- 12 Womensphere 'India reserves 50% seats for women in local self-government' 24 September 2009 accessed from <http://womensphere.wordpress.com/2009/09/24/india-reserves-50-seats-for-women-in-local-self-government/>
  - 13 UN Women 'Facts and Figures: Leadership and Political Participation' 9 November 2015 accessed from <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures#sthash.7rmPyfTV.dpuf>
  - 14 Gender Links 'Gender, Elections and Media Factsheet: Women in Lesotho Politics' accessed from [www.genderlinks.org.za/attachment.php?aa\\_id=11848](http://www.genderlinks.org.za/attachment.php?aa_id=11848)
  - 15 Electoral Institute for Southern Africa 'Namibia – Women's Representation Quotas 2009' accessed from <http://www.eisa.org.za/WEP/namquotas.htm>
  - 16 Local Government Association of South Australia 'Women in Local Government' accessed from <http://www.lga.sa.gov.au/site/page.cfm?u=1610>
  - 17 Electoral Institute for Southern Africa: South Africa 2011 Local election candidates by province and gender accessed from <http://www.eisa.org.za/WEP/sou2011candidates1.htm>
  - 18 The Republic of Uganda Ministry of Local Government 'Challenges Confronting Women Leaders in Local Government – The Uganda Experience' (May 2008) accessed from <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan031076.pdf>
-

## Perceived obstacles and recommendations

A lack of gender balance still persists, particularly in the Pacific Island member countries and less than 10% of women parliamentarians in the West Africa region. The under-representation of women is mostly symptomatic of persistent gender stereotypes, conflict between family and work demands, patriarchy and the lack of an enabling political environment, inadequate funding to support female candidates, the absence of special measures/quotas, low literacy levels, the lack of job security in politics, the absence of female role models and a lack of training for political participation. This situation calls for more concerted action by Commonwealth governments to increase women's representation in both public and private sectors to the agreed minimum of 30 per cent.

## Strategies to increase women's representation in decision-making

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

---

**Quotas used in politics** – Over 70 countries globally have adopted alternative forms of quotas, which have advanced the participation of women in decision-making. There are three notable types of gender quotas used in politics: 1) reserved seats (constitutional and/or legislative); 2) legal candidate quotas and/or reserved constituencies (constitutional and/or legislative); and 3) Political party quotas (voluntary). A combination of quotas with the first past the post electoral model has proved effective in fast-tracking the representation of women in Bangladesh, India, Rwanda and Uganda.<sup>18</sup> Reserved constituencies and/or reserved seats for women to contest independently and by direct election has worked in the Rwanda, Swaziland and Uganda national elections, and in Bangladesh, India and Lesotho local governance. Voluntary quotas have effectively mainstreamed women in South Africa adopted by the ruling party the African National Congress. Tanzania was the first African country to introduce quotas in its constitution, now emulated in many other African countries. South Africa's 2012 National Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender now guarantees equitable representation of women at all levels of decision-making across all political parties and sectors.

**Capacity building for women** – Some countries have provided leadership and management training for women to 'build the capacity of female political aspirants' as well as to equip them with qualities such as 'self-confidence and assertiveness' as most agree that "economic disadvantage impedes equal participation."<sup>19</sup> The continued dominance of political life by men is not good for men and it's not good for women. Affirmative action for women representation at all decision making levels remains a challenge, seen as positive action for women at the detriment of men.

---

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

---

Thus awareness creation and training activities are being used to sensitise societies to the need to vote for women across many African countries, including Botswana, Lesotho and Nigeria.<sup>20</sup>

Australia, Canada and Trinidad and Tobago have succeeded in strengthening the representation of women in local governance without introducing affirmative action policies; through civil society capacity building efforts for women interested in local governance.<sup>21</sup>

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

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

---

20 UN Economic Commission for Africa 'Beijing Platform for Action +15 Africa Synthesis Report', 2009:15 accessed from [http://www.uneca.org/eca\\_programmes/acgd/beijingplus15/documents/15YearReviewofBPfA.pdf](http://www.uneca.org/eca_programmes/acgd/beijingplus15/documents/15YearReviewofBPfA.pdf)

21 Ibid.

---

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

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

**Involving male champions** – Practically it is important to partner with men who have long-standing control of power, and sensitise them to understand gender equity, equality and mainstreaming. In this way, male champions can serve as agents for change for the inclusion and effective participation of women at all levels and across all sectors including the home.

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

For further information please contact:  
Kemi Ogunsanya, Adviser Gender Section  
k.ogunsanya@commonwealth.int

Gender Section, Secretary-General's Office  
Commonwealth Secretariat, Marlborough House,  
Pall Mall, London SW1Y 5HX, United Kingdom  
gender@commonwealth.int

---

## Publication



The Impact of Women's Political Leadership on Democracy and Development describes the barriers to women's political participation and explains why the contribution of women is so crucial to democracy. It identifies established strategies – electoral reform (New Zealand), party voluntary quotas (South Africa), and legislative quotas (Bangladesh and India) – that have helped these Commonwealth countries to meet the global target of 30 per cent and thus to effectively advance the participation of women in decision-making at all levels.

ISBN 978-1-84929-109-5

To request for this publication please contact the Publications Section.  
[publications@commonwealth.int](mailto:publications@commonwealth.int)



