



COMMONWEALTH
SECRETARIAT

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

INFORMATION BRIEF



Introduction

The Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005–2015 (PoA)¹ draws on international commitments for the realisation of women's rights enshrined in CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals and other agreements on health and education targets. The MDGs and other international instruments have been catalysts to increase the representation of women in leadership roles and decision-making positions by 2015. The United Nations and the Commonwealth Secretariat have committed to assisting their member countries to reach gender equality within the proscribed time frame. International organisations, development institutions and civil society have also contributed to reaching these global commitments. The PoA recommends member countries achieve a target of no less than 30 per cent of women in decision-making in the political, public and private sectors by 2015, the Commonwealth still faces a steep challenge in reaching this target.

Current situation of women in leadership positions

Around the world, a lack of gender balance in decision-making positions in governments persist. Global statistics reveal that women continue to be under-represented in national parliaments, the share of women among Ministers now averages 20.4 per cent; an increase of 1.4 per cent from 2011². The highest positions are even more elusive: only 17 of 193 Heads of State and/or Government in the world are women (down from 20 in 2011). Five are from Commonwealth countries: *Prime Ministers Julia Gillard of*

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/

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

*Australia, Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh, Portia Simpson-Miller of Jamaica, President Joyce Banda of Malawi and Kamla Persad-Bissessar of Trinidad and Tobago.*³ Furthermore, HM Queen Elizabeth II is represented by women Governor-Generals in Antigua and Barbuda, Australia and St Lucia.⁴ It is noteworthy to share the significance of the first female Chair of the Commonwealth, Prime Minister Persad Bissessar of Trinidad and Tobago, who handed over to another female leader, the Prime Minister Gillard of Australia in 2012.

From 2010–2013, women leaders were re-elected and/or appointed as Deputy/Vice Presidents in Bangladesh, Dominica, The Gambia, Kiribati, Malawi, Mauritius, Singapore, and Trinidad and Tobago.⁵ Many women have held Ministerial positions beyond Gender portfolios, such as Foreign Affairs, Finance, Defence, Environment, Public Service, Energy, etc., positions which have been traditionally held by men. A number of women were also appointed as Speaker or Deputy Speaker of Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament. There are only 39 Women Speakers out of the 189 Parliaments globally, and 16 are from the Commonwealth.

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

4 Ibid.

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

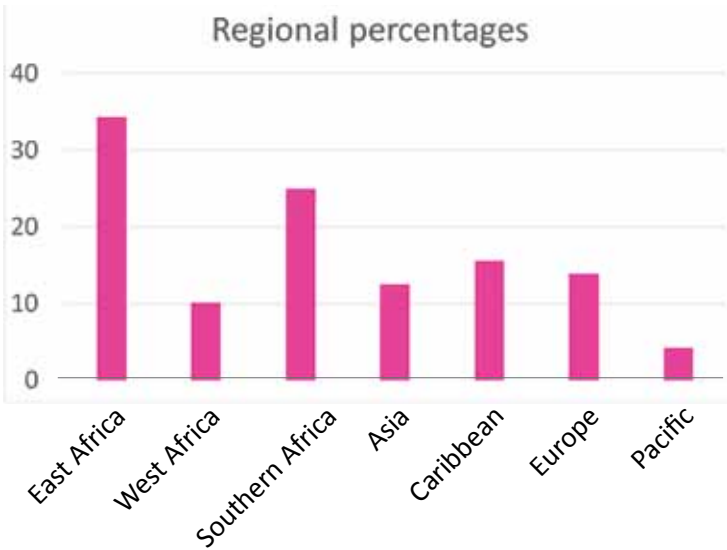
COMMONWEALTH WOMEN SPEAKERS

AFRICA REGION <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Botswana (National Assembly)▪ Mozambique (Assembleia da Republica)▪ Rwanda (Chamber of Deputies)▪ Swaziland (Senate)▪ Uganda (Parliament)▪ United Republic of Tanzania (Bunge)	ASIA REGION <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Bangladesh (Jatiya Sangsad)▪ India (Lok Sabha)▪ Pakistan (National Assembly)▪ Singapore (Parliament)
CARIBBEAN REGION <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Antigua and Barbuda (House of Representatives and Senate);▪ Bahamas (Senate)▪ Barbados (Senate)▪ Dominica (House of Assembly)	EUROPE REGION <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ United Kingdom (House of Lords) PACIFIC REGION <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Australia (House of Representatives)

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

mainstreaming gender. In 2013, eleven Commonwealth member countries are in the top forty countries for mainstreaming women into parliament: Guyana, Grenada, Lesotho, Mozambique, New Zealand, Rwanda, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uganda. Rwanda still tops the list with parliament consisting of 56 per cent women, closely followed by Seychelles with 43 per cent and South Africa with 42 per cent.⁶ 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 below 20 per cent: this is comparable with global statistics, which show that on average only 20.8 per cent of seats are occupied by women. The regional representation of women is shown in *Figure 1* below.

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



⁶ Women in Politics: Inter-Parliamentary Union accessed from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

Women's parliamentary representation remains very weak in the Pacific Island States. Women represent an average of 4.2 per cent 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.⁷ Notably, Kiribati's Vice President, Teima Onorio, is the country's only female MP and first female cabinet member in 26 years⁸. In 2012, three female MPs joined the Solomon Islands National Parliament, similarly, in Papua New Guinea, three women won open seats into parliament. The representation of women in Commonwealth parliaments is shown in *Figures 2 – 6* the year 2013 in graphs below.

Across the Commonwealth, women have played critical roles in local governance. Female elected councillors and mayors are under-represented in all regions of the world. Following constitutional amendments to reserve one-third of all local government seats for women in India and Bangladesh, over one million women have been elected to India's Panchayat Raj and Bangladesh's Upazila Parishad⁹. Namibia¹⁰ and Lesotho¹¹ have attained over 30 per cent representation of women in local governance. New

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

8 Worldwide Guide to Women in Leadership: Female Vice Presidents and Deputy Heads of States accessed from <http://www.guide-2womenleaders.com/Vice-Presidents.htm>

9 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/>

10 Electoral Institute for Southern Africa 'Namibia – Women's Representation Quotas 2009 accessed from <http://www.eisa.org.za/WEP/namquotas.htm>

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

Zealand¹², South Africa¹³ and Uganda¹⁴ have also reached the global target of 30 per cent of women represented at the local government level.

Perceived obstacles and recommendations

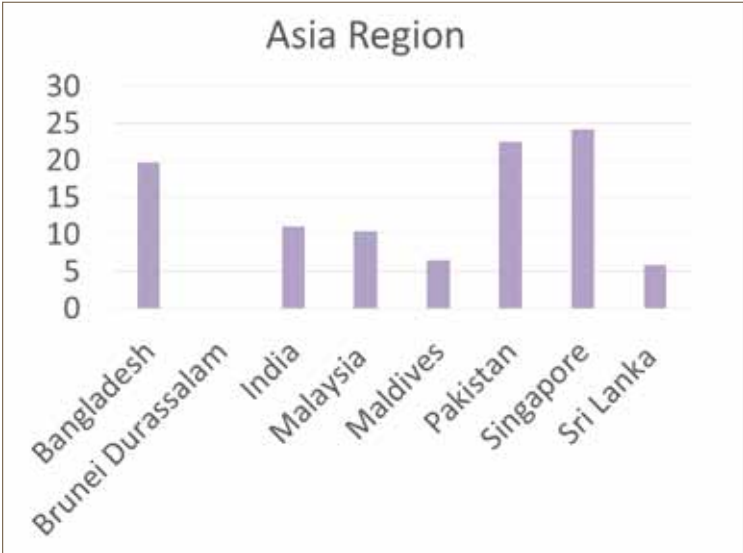
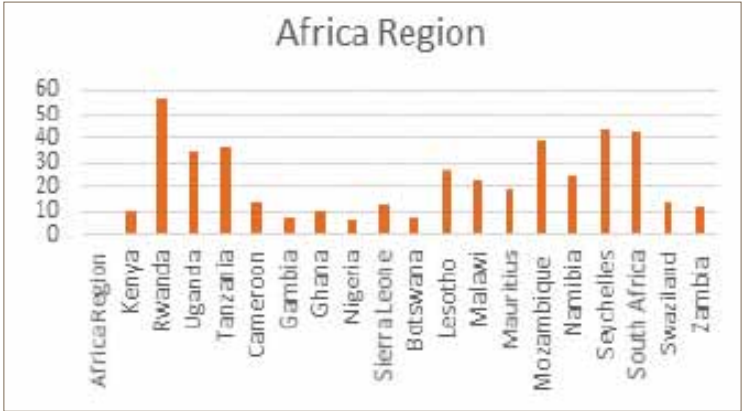
A lack of gender balance still persists, with continued weakness in Pacific Island member countries where women represent an average of four (4) per cent of all elected representatives, and ten (10) per cent in the West Africa region. The underrepresentation of women is mostly symptomatic of persistent 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.

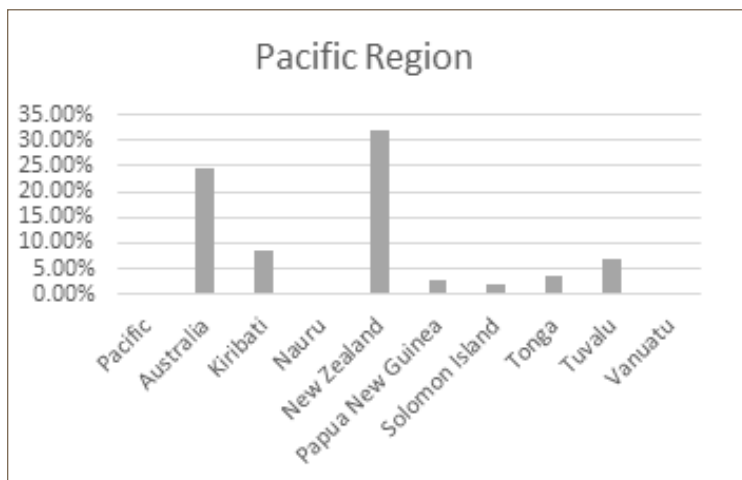
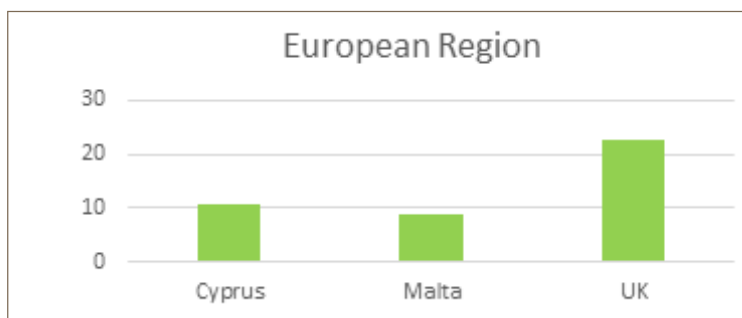
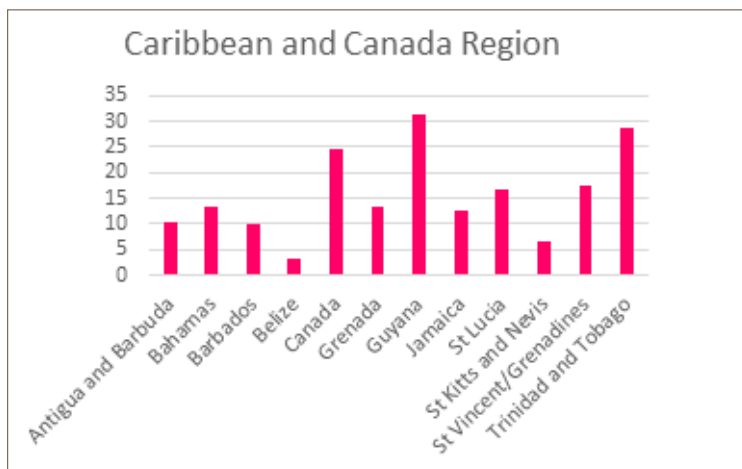
12 Local Government Association of South Australia 'Women in Local Government' accessed from <http://www.lga.sa.gov.au/site/page.cfm?u=1610>

13 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>

14 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/intra-doc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan031076.pdf>

Figures 2 – 6: Women’s political representation in the regions of the Commonwealth





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. 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."¹⁵ The continued dominance of political life ... by men is not good for men and it's not good for women. Because affirmative action for women representation at all decision making levels is still a challenge, awareness creation and training activities are being used to sensitise societies to the need to vote for women across many African countries, including Botswana, The Gambia, Lesotho and Nigeria.¹⁶

Australia, Canada and Trinidad and Tobago has succeeded in strengthening the representation of women in local governance without introducing affirmative action policies; this has been achieved through civil society capacity building efforts for women interested in local governance.¹⁷

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

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

16 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

17 Ibid.

Sri Lanka has a Citizens Amendment Act that guarantees equal rights for women and men. Botswana, Grenada and the Maldives have drafted National Gender Policies that are yet to be adopted. Other 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.

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 and Political Development

k.ogunsanya@commonwealth.int

Gender Section, Social Transformation Programmes Division, Commonwealth Secretariat

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