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**WOMEN MAKE  
UP MORE THAN  
HALF THE WORLD'S  
PEOPLE BUT  
ONLY A FIFTH  
OF THE WORLD'S  
DECISION-MAKERS.**

Tanzania Gender Networking Programme



**Less than 20% of parliamentarians worldwide are women. Only 21 countries have managed to reach 30% or more women's representation in their lower house of parliament. Of 785 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) women are 238, that is, 30%. Only 25% of MEPs from the United Kingdom (UK) are women.**

In the British Parliament, only 19.5% are women, putting the UK in 59th place among other parliaments in the world in terms of the proportion of women members. This is lower than Rwanda, Afghanistan, China and Honduras, and certainly much lower than some European countries.

## Women in parliaments worldwide<sup>1</sup>

Ranking	Country	% women (lower or single house)
1	Rwanda <sup>2</sup>	48.8%
2	Sweden	47.3%
3	Cuba	43.2%
4	Finland	41.5%
5	Argentina	40%
9	Spain	36.3%
12	Mozambique	34.8%
15	South Africa*	33%
20	Tanzania	30.4%
26	Afghanistan	27.7%
39	Honduras	23.4%
49	China	21.3%
54	The Philippines	20.5%
59	UK	19.5%
61	Nicaragua	18.5%
67	Bolivia	16.9%
75	Zambia	15.2%
87	Malawi	13%
92	Guatemala	12%
105	India	9.1%

<sup>1</sup> Situation as of July 31, 2008 \* Does not include the 36 special rotating delegates.

The under-representation of women worldwide remains particularly pronounced for marginalised groups of women, such as, the poorest, indigenous, Dalit (former ‘untouchables’), migrant, disabled, and those living with HIV. These women, who bear the brunt of poverty and discrimination, are excluded from making decisions that could potentially transform their lives.

The barriers to women’s political participation are numerous, pervasive, and well-known: they are expected to conform to stereotypes, their contributions are not valued, they have to fulfil multiple roles, they lack the confidence, resources or access to claim positions of power, they are threatened with violence and confronted with the patriarchal bias of political parties, structures, systems and procedures. Gender-based violence is one of the key factors preventing and limiting women’s participation in political processes and in holding their government to account.

Laws and international agreements to promote women’s political participation are in place. Many countries enshrine equality between women and men in their constitution. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), a key tool on women’s rights, was adopted in 1979. The Beijing Platform for Action was agreed in 1995.



## The Women's Convention (CEDAW)

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was signed on 18th of December 1979. It has been ratified by almost all countries worldwide.

Article 7 says that all States who ratify the Convention “shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

- (a) To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;
- (b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;
- (c) To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.”

Article 8 of the Convention says that women should have “the opportunity to represent their Governments at the international level” on “equal terms with men and without any discrimination”.

What has happened in the last three decades? Progress is slow, patchy and in some places, reversing. It is time for real action.

**One World Action's More Women More Power** Campaign is calling for *women to occupy 50 per cent or more of seats in parliaments and elected bodies*. We are campaigning for radical measures to enable women to participate fully in political decision-making. We believe that pushing for women's greater representation and participation in politics will help end centuries of discrimination and will contribute towards more robust democracies and equitable development worldwide.

One World Action sees women's political rights as vital to securing and retaining all other rights. While we see the family, community, workplace, civil society and social movements as important political spaces, we believe that it is a matter of justice and democracy that women should be fairly represented in formal political decision-making at local, national, regional and international levels.

There is evidence that women's greater representation in political bodies makes a big difference for women and the wider society. The presence of women in greater numbers ensures different perspectives, solutions and approaches in decision-making. It means

that issues around gender equality and equity are acknowledged and addressed within international and national policy debates — for example, on the economy, trade, climate change, foreign policy and defence.

It also means that issues such as marriage and divorce, equality under the law, violence against women, reproductive rights and health, rape, public services, caring, equal pay, parental leave, pensions and others critical to the welfare of women, men and children, are prioritised.

What is required is a critical mass of women who will work to transform the political structures, their agenda, priorities and ways of working. That is a critical mass of women who are committed to a pro-women, pro-citizen and feminist agenda.

**“Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning.”**

Beijing Platform for Action, 1995

Around the world women are slowly claiming their right to be politically active and to making their voices and concerns heard in formal political and informal political spaces.

**Rwanda** now has 55% of women in its national parliament, putting the country number 1 in the ranking (Sweden has 47.3%). Rwanda surpassed the commitment in its Constitution to ensuring equal rights between women and men and the principle of 30% of all decision-making posts at national level and 20% at sub-national level to be allocated to women.<sup>3</sup>

The **Southern Africa Development Community** has adopted a protocol calling on governments to ensure gender parity in political representation.

The **Africa Union (AU)** has adopted a 30% target which will be raised to **gender parity** in all areas of decision-making' by 2020. They aim to reach the targets through affirmative action, reform of electoral systems, criteria for selection of women candidates and for recruitment for appointments, and awareness-raising. The AU recommends strongly that all Africa governments should take steps to do the same in their local

and national government structures, government and parliamentary committees.

**The Philippines** passed a Party List Law in 1995 making it compulsory to include women on political party lists. Twenty per cent of the 250 seats in the Lower House are allocated for women and marginalised groups.

Sustained pressure by women's organisations and women in political parties in **Bolivia** was successful in achieving an Electoral Code which mandated all parties to have at least 30% women on their national lists. However, parties have been slow to implement this and political violence against women is commonplace.

In **Honduras**, the Centro de Estudios de la Mujer (CEM-H) and the Parliamentary Women's Committee in the National Assembly have developed a form which women MPs complete to record how well they are acting on the grassroots women's agendas. Women MPs and CEM-H are now monitoring how the national budget targets and benefits women's rights programmes, in particular, the \$16m funds allocated to the government women's office (Fiscalía

de Las Mujeres) which deals with women's denunciations of violence and sexual abuse.

**India** amended its Constitution with effect from 1994 to reserve one-third of seats in local self-governing bodies (panchayats and municipalities) for women. The result was spectacular with thousands of women being elected. The on-going challenge is to support these women so that they can be effective and stay in office.

The Equality Law passed in **Spain** in 2007 introduced the "principle of balanced presence" and required political party electoral lists to have a minimum of 40% and a maximum of 60% of women or men as candidates in general, regional, European and local elections. The impact was dramatic: women are now 36.3% of the Spanish parliament and hold nine ministerial posts (eight are held by men).

Some parts of the **UK** have likewise made progress. Women are 34.1% of the Scottish Parliament and 46.7% of the Welsh Assembly. This was achieved through some political parties adopting all-women shortlists and constituency twinning.

Recognising that 'it will take 80 years to elect a representative House of Commons', the UK June 2008 *Equality Bill – Framework for a Fairer Future* commits to extend the use of women-only shortlists, which are due to expire in 2015, to 2030.

In 1995, government representatives the world over went to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. They agreed a Declaration and Platform for Action.

The Platform calls on all governments to review electoral systems, reform them if needed, and encourage political parties to integrate women in elective and non-elective positions "in the same proportion and at the same levels as men".

Yet, despite the growing numbers of women elected, women remain under-represented in local and national governing bodies throughout the world. How can we achieve significant and enduring gains for women's political representation the world over?

**One World Action's More Women More Power** Campaign advocates a range of measures to achieve the 50 per cent or more target for gender balance in elected bodies. Below are some of the means used successfully in different countries:

**All-women shortlists in winnable seats** are an effective and quick way to reach equality in representation. Candidates must be selected from a list made up of women only.

**Quotas** aimed at political parties and/or governance structures are a form of positive action to correct the inequalities which systematically exclude women from elected political positions.

**Constituency twinning** pairs constituencies with a woman and a man selected in the twinned areas. To achieve significant results twinning has to be widespread.

**“All Women Shortlists as the quickest and most effective means of delivering equal representation, pointing out that the Labour Party's use of such equality guarantees has been central to the increased number of women in Westminster, the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. Another measure of interest is the Liberal Democrat's use of sex quotas at the shortlisting level, which helps to counter electorate discrimination.”**  
Lis Astall in Women at the Top 2005, Changing Numbers, Changing Politics? (Hansard Society, London)

Adopting the Gender Parity principle means getting in equal or as near as equal as possible numbers of women and men in all bodies and committees.

The world is full of amazing, talented, experienced and qualified women who are kept out of politics simply because they are women. **Merit is not the issue, discrimination is.**

Yet some oppose positive action for equality on the grounds that it goes against the principle of meritocracy. The argument goes that if women are 'good enough', they will be elected.

This is a flawed argument with a built-in bias.

From early on in their lives, women suffer from discrimination in terms of nutrition, health care, access to education and economic resources. As adults, they face exclusion from the political arena. And yet this is often justified in terms of men's superiority rather than the outcome of centuries of discrimination against women.

Positive action aims to rectify systemic inequalities in a bold and comprehensive manner. Slow, incremental changes are no longer sufficient. According to the 5th annual Sex and Power report by the UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission (September 2008), it will take 200 years for women to get equal representation in parliament in the UK at the current rate of progress.

It took a long time for women to get the vote. Without positive action, it will take centuries more to gain gender balance in political institutions.



Take an active part in the **More Women More Power** Campaign!

Send the **More Women More Power Postcard** to the Secretary of State for International Development pressing for more aid to go to programmes which promote and support women's political participation at national and local levels.

Sign the **More Women More Power Petition** calling on the UK Prime Minister to take immediate action to implement Article 7 of CEDAW through measures such as legislative action on quotas, all-women shortlists or constituency twinning. You can sign the online petition at: [www.oneworldaction.org](http://www.oneworldaction.org).

Organise a local **More Women More Power Campaign** meeting in your political party, workplace, community or college.

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Endnotes

- 1 Source: Women in Parliaments: World Classification (Inter Parliamentary Union) <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.
- 2 In the September 2008 elections in Rwanda, women gained 44 of 80 seats making it the first country where women have a majority.
- 3 (<http://www.iknowpolitics.org/en/node/2566>)