



Women Representation in the Electoral Office: Progress and Challenges

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Abstract

Over the past three decades, there has been a rise in efforts to increase the percentage of women in decision-making bodies across the globe including representation of women into electoral office. This was done through quotas, constituency elections, regulations, and party lists. Yet, women's representation in the electoral office globally is still low. There are different contributory factors to the aforementioned progress and challenges. The challenges are caused in the main by cultural and religious conditions. There are countries that are globally recognised for achieving parity in the election of women into parliaments, The Nordic states and Rwanda in Africa have done well in this regard. Yet, the achievement of equal representation does not translate into gender equality within their society and institutions. This study evaluates women's representation in the electoral office in selected countries.



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Introduction

The recent decades were according to Cornwall [Preface] (2014: viii) characterised by significant progress in the number of women accessing electoral political office in the world. This is not exclusively an outcome of quotas but it is also attributed to the global growth of the feminist movement globally. However, quotas are still seen to be playing an important role in the increase of women's representation. As a result, Stockemer (Stockemer, 2011, p. 694) attributes some of the progress made in women's

representation in the electoral office to increased descriptive representation of women in parliament.

Descriptive representation means the targeted allocation of a specific number of seats for women in the electoral office almost similar to quota representation. This study examines women representation of women in the electoral office of different countries. It looks at the nature of women's representation through quotas, party lists, and constituencies. The study also assesses

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the conditions that enable women to obtain parliamentary seats. It further seeks to verify which method is more favourable for the election of women. A previous study conducted by Caul (Caul, 1999) looked at women's representation in parliament through the lenses of political parties. This study looks at the progress and challenges in the election of women into electoral office. According to Caul (Caul, 1999, p. 79) elected women averaged 12% across the world in 1999. It is therefore important to measure the progress made from then. This study also examines the contribution of the women's movement to the progress made in the election of women into the electoral office. It identifies the factors hindering the election of women into political office. Women's election into political office is essential for advancing the status of women, gender sensitivity, human rights, an all-inclusive economy, social welfare, peace, stability, and sustainable socio-economic development.

Methodology

A comprehensive 10-year review of past publications, and analysis of reports from different organizations like United Nations Women, Inter-Parliamentary Union, etc. ranging from 1999 to 2022 was conducted. This included reports and publications focusing on the participation of women in electoral office and politics. The study is two-dimensional as it covers the quantitative data on women's representation and the qualitative data on the progress and the challenges affecting women's representation in the electoral office. The data were manually harvested to ensure that only subject is focused on the subject. The findings were thematically classified with a particular focus on the historical development of women's representativity. The study is two-dimensional as it covers the quantitative data on women's representation and the qualitative data on the progress and the challenges affecting women's representation in the electoral office.

Background and Historical Development on Women Representativity

Part one of the resolutions of the United Nations (UN) World Conference of the International Women's Year (United Nations, 1975, p. 4), the UN called for the allocation of necessary resources to enable the participation of women in the political life of their countries and of the international communities with equal rights indecision making so as to determine

their well-being. This development from the UN's Mexico conference was necessary as it compelled member states to invest in the development of opportunities including the capacitation of women for participation in political and other decision-making platforms.

Resolution 34/180 adopted by the UN General Assembly further compelled all member states of the UN to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women (United Nations, 1979 p. 137). The significance of Article 7 is the elimination of all forms of discrimination which included the prevention of women from being elected into the public office which was in the main informed by cultural and religious beliefs upheld by states. As a result, a gradual yet small shift is seen by Lawless and Fox (Lawless *et al.*, 2008, p. 2) between 1980 and 2008.

However, a dramatic increase in women's representation in electoral office was observed by Lawless and Fox (Lawless *et al.*, 2008) from the 1990s to the 2000s. This may be attributed to the two critical epochs in the struggle for gender equality namely; the UN's World Conference of the International Women's Year (Mexico, 1975) and the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995). The UN's Fourth World Conference on Women held in September 1995 herein referred to as the Beijing conference was seen as a milestone on the agenda for increased women's representation across the World.

According to Vetten (Vetten, 2016, p. 1), the Beijing Conference called for the development of measures to ensure women's equal access to, and full participation in, power structures and decision-making. This included the electoral office (national parliaments, state legislature, and municipalities). The Beijing Conference is significant for the gender-based quantification of representativity and the call for equal representation at all decision-making platforms.

The Beijing platform is accredited for setting the tone and providing a roadmap for gender equality (United Nations Women, 2014). There is significant progress recognised by the UN Women (2014) as states and civil society put efforts to eliminate inequality across the board and discrimination. However, the world still remains unequal, even in areas where

women's representation has grown exponentially at the electoral office. Inequality still persists (UN Women, 2014).

To this end, women have been conspicuous by their absence of indecision and policy-making in government (Ndirangu, *et al.*, 2017, p. 746). In her foreword to the Africa Barometer (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2021:5) Her Excellency Dr. Joyce Banda, former President of the Republic of Malawi cautions that the UN's Sustainable Development goal five on gender equality will not be realised unless drastic changes are made especially in Africa.

The UN's sustainable development goal five focuses on achieving gender equality and empowerment of women and girls through amongst others ensuring full and effective women participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making including political life (United Nations, 202, p. 12).

Despite all these commitments Women's representation in the electoral office itself and other decision-making bodies is still minimal. This paper

focuses on the progress made and challenges experienced in the advancement of women's representation in the electoral office, the election of women into constituencies, and barriers to the election of women into the electoral office and other thematic areas.

Table 1.1 below is a reflection of the seats held by women in national parliaments between 2020 and 2021 in seven regions of the World. The table places global women representation at an average of 25% and that Latin America and the Caribbean plus Europe and Northern America are leading with the percentage of women elected into national parliaments at 32% respectively.

It also shows that Oceania and Central and Southern Asia are the lowest rankings with 18% women elected into national parliaments. This indicates that the whole world is far behind in the equal representation of women in electoral offices. To this end, the United Nations (2021:37) indicate that it will take 40 more years to achieve equal representation of men and women in national parliaments if this trend continues.

Table 1.1: Reflection on the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments. Adapted from: ANFREL News (2022)

REGION	2020(%)	2021(%)	Positive/Negative Mobility
1. Central and Southern Asia	18.86	18.91	Positive
2. Eastern and –Eastern Asia	21.16	21.61	Positive
3. Europe and Northern America	31.02	31.53	Positive
4. Latin America and the Caribbean	32.09	32.96	Positive
5. Northern Africa and Western Asia	17.42	19.18	Positive
6. Oceania	16.56	18.01	Positive
7. Sub-Saharan Africa	24.34	25.61	Positive
8. World	24.34	25.61	Positive

The year 2004 according to the Inter-parliamentary Union (IPU) (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2004) is recognised for reaching a global milestone of 15.2% women representation combined across the world. This marked represented a 4.5% upward mobility from the previously recorded 10.7% women representation in parliaments across the globe. At this period the IPU also reported that only 14 countries across the globe had 30% women representation in their parliaments.

In Africa, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, (2021:7) indicates that Women in electoral office stand at 24% at national parliaments while the situation is severe at local government standing at 21% of councilors (but data could only be obtained from 19 countries). Further noted is that elected women do not occupy senior positions in both parliament and the Executive. To this end, only 12% of women lead political parties

in Africa, 21% of women are Speakers and 22% of women are occupying cabinet positions. It can thus be concluded that even where women are elected they are still paced at the lower rungs of leadership in their countries.

Table 1.2 below reflects on women's political participation in Africa, the continent is subdivided into seven regions including the Horn of Africa, East

Africa, Southern Africa, Central Africa, North Africa, and West Africa. The evaluation criteria focus on 11 criteria including women in parliaments, women in Cabinet, and Women Speakers as of the year 2021. From the table, it is clear even the election of women itself does not translate to leadership positions. The worst case is the election of women into local government councils where the percentage of women is the lowest.

Table 1.2: Women Political Participation in Africa 2021. Adapted from International Institute for Democracy and electoral Assistance, 2021:7)

	Horn	East	South	Central	North	West	Total Africa
Women in lower houses of parliaments	33%	33%	28%	19%	24%	16%	25%
Women in upper houses of parliaments	30%	29%	28%	20%	11%	12%	20%
Women in parliament overall	33%	32%	28%	19%	21%	16%	24%
Women in local government	N/A	35%	20%	27%	3%	2%	21%
Women in political party leadership	17%	15%	14%	7%	0%	11%	12%
Women in Election Monitoring Bodies	21%	45%	40%	20%	25%	24%	28%
Women Speakers	0%	33%	35%	18%	0%	16%	21%
Women Mayors of capital cities	20%	0%	19%	43%	0%	20%	19%
Women in top executive positions	10%	12%	9%	7%	0%	7%	7%
Women in Cabinet	23%	32%	26%	20%	13%	19%	22%

Key Observations

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2019), global women's representation in the electoral office stood at an average of twenty-four percent (24%) with Middle and North Africa recording the lowest averages at sixteen point eight percent (16,8%). In order to gain a deeper understanding of the subject women's representation was further looked at country level where all the houses were combined into a national average for each in a range of ten years from 1999 to 2019.

Women in Electoral Office by Country

Contribution of the Women Movement to Election of Women into Electoral Office

The progress on the election of women into electoral office is synonymous with the struggles and the progress of the women's movement and feminist organisations. It has according to Esmailian (2020) shaken the ground in the most difficult regions like Iran and Sri Lanka in Asia resulting in a small but significant increase in the number of women elected.

As the number of elected women increases, Geisler (Geisler, 2000, p. 65) notes that the leaders of the feminist movement and women advocacy groups are lost from organisation into parliamentary seats which is a threat to the women's movement. However, the election of leaders of the feminist movement and women's rights activists has increased the discussion about women's emancipation in governments and parliaments across the world. The women movement has united women across political, religious and cultural affiliations across the globe. It has created multidisciplinary and cross cultural bodies to advance the gender agenda. Worth noting is the United nations Women, a body that exist and represent the plight of women within the United Nations. Gender plays a significant role in the prediction of economic situation and power relations (Wakefield, 2017, pg. 6). The election of women into parliament is transformative and symbolises the gains and the strength of the women movement across the globe. However, the gender networks and the women movement need to continuously strengthened through resource allocation and capacitation.

**Table 1.3: Women representation in Electoral Office by Country
(Single = only one House/No upper House)**

Country	Total Women Representations 10 Year Gap									
	Lower House	Upper House	Lower House	Upper House	Lower House	Upper House	Lower House	Upper House	Lower House	Upper House
	1999	1999	2004	2004	2009	2009	2014	2014	2019	2019
Austria	26.78%	14.3%	33.8%	27.4%	27.32%	29.5%	31.1%	29.0%	37.2	36.1%
South Africa	29.8%	31.5%	32.8%	33.3%	43.5%	29.6%	42.7%	35.2%	36%	46%
Rwanda	4.3%	-	48.8%	34.6%	56%	32%	63.7%	38.5%	61.3%	36%
Nigeria	3.38%	0.73%%	4.7%	2.8%	7.0%	7.3%	5.6%	6.5%	3.33%	7.34%
Germany	30.9%	-	32.5%	18.8%	32.8%	-	36.8%	-	30.9%	34%
Denmark	37.4%	Single	36.9%	Single	37.4%	Single	37.4%	Single	39.7%	Single
Cote d'Ivoire	8.5%	Single	N/A	N/A	20.8%	35%	36.3%	Single	29.0%	Single
Italy	9.8%	7.8%	11.1%	9.7%	21.1%	18.0%	31.4%	28.8%	35.7%	34.4%
United States of America	13.3%	9.0%	14.9%	15.2%	14.0%	17.4%	19.3%	20.0%	23.5%	25.0%
Brazil	5.7%	7.4%	6.2%	12.3%	8.6%	16.0%	9.9%	13.6	14.6	28%
Botswana	17%	Single	11.1%	Single	7.9%	Single	9.5%	Single	10.76%	Single
ESwotini	3.1%	13.3%	10.8%	10.5%	13.8%	40.0%	6.2%	33.3%	9.6%	23.3%
France	10.9%	5.9%	12.3%	16.9%	18.2%	21.9%	26.9%	25.0%	38.8%	29.3%
Sweden	42.7%	7.9%	45.3%	11.8%	45%		43.6%	12.76%	46.1%	11.48%
India	9.6.7%	7.7%	9.6%	11.4%	11.8%	9.8%	12.5%	12.7%	14.36	10.2%
Sri Lanka	5.4%	Single	4.9%	Single	5.3%	Single	4.9%	Single	5.3%	Single
Egypt	2.0%	6.8%	2.0%	6.8%	6.8%	8.0%	14.9%	Single	27%	Single
UAE	0%	Single	0%	Single	5%	Single	17.5%	Single	22.5%	Single
Norway	36.4%	Single	36.4%	Single	39.6%	Single	39.6%	Single	44.97%	Single
Uganda	18.8%	Single	17.8%	Single	27.6%	Single	27.6%	Single	12.0%	Single
Kuwait	0%	Single	4.8%	Single	7.7%	Single	1.5%	Single	2.0%	Single
Pakistan	1,16%%	1.14%	21%	17%	22%	21%	21%	18%	20%	19.2%
Canada	21%	30.8%	21.1%	39.6%	22%	35.0%	22.7%	39.6%	28.9%	43.0%
Finland	37.0%	Single	37.5%	Single	41.5%	Single	42.5%	Single		Single
Iran	3.4%	Single	4.1%	Single	2.8%	Single	3.1%	Single	6%	Single

Sources: IPU, UN Women, Gender Links, Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, Research Gate, Statistica (2022) and the Parliamentary Monitoring Group)

NB: The above indicators does not mean the election consistently happened in the same year but it a year or two years away from the past elections and represent a period prior the next election. Some elections were held a year away from the period. Elections are not held at the same year in many countries. The validity of the figures is thus based on the immediate past election or date closer to the election in each country listed on the table.

Election of Women through Constituency Seats
Lawless and Fox (Lawless *et al.*, 2008) conducted a survey in the United States of America (USA) and found that women's representation was very low with

Men occupying 84% of the seats in the USA's 110 Congress. The authors further found that Women in the USA were less courageous about running for electoral office compared to men then. There is a

significant lack of courage to endure the burden of campaigning for political office amongst women in the USA.

There have been significant milestones in the body politics of women leadership including the election of Ms. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as President of Liberia (2006 to 2018), the appointment of Ms. Joyce Banda as the President of Malawi (2012-2014), and President Sahle-Work Zewde of Ethiopia (in office since 2018). In Asia, India elected its first female President (Pratibha Devi Patil) in 2007 serving until the year 2012. Whilst in Europe, Germany was under a female Chancellor (Angela Merkel) between 2005 and 2021.

In South America, the world saw Brazil led by former President Dilma Rousseff from 2011 to 2016 when she was suspended. Whilst the USA is celebrating the election of Ms. Kamala Harris as the first Deputy President of the country and the US is yet to have a female President. Whilst these milestones are significant, they only represent a fraction of the desired changes and the attainment of equal representation of men and women in the electoral office. The USA is glaringly lagging behind with 144 (27%) of 539 seats of both houses at the 117th Congress of the USA (Blazina and Desilver, 2021).

Election of Women through Party Lists

Women are still under-represented in the parliaments of all advanced industrial democracies (Caul, 1999, p. 79). Political parties have a bigger role in enabling women's representation in the electoral office. Exclusive women's political parties have not been able to garner significant support either. In South Africa, neither the Women's Rights Peace Party, which contested the 1994 elections, nor Women Forward, which took part in the 2009 elections, were able to secure more than 0.03% of the vote (Vetten, 2016, p. 4).

It is significant to note that women's representation increases faster in countries where seats are allocated through proportional lists. The adoption of a gender parity list is seen by (Wangnerud, 2009:54) as a key driver for change across political parties resulting in the increased number of women candidates and parliamentarians eventually. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Women

(United Nations Women, 2015, p. 65) election of women in most countries is done through the registration of candidates by an endorsement of a political party (or affiliation to a political party or grouping), especially under a list-proportional representation system.

Women are also able to compete as independent candidates where electoral rules allow individuals to contest elections. While some systems permit independent candidates. Ndirangu, Onkware and Chitere (Ndirangu *et al.*, 2017, p. 746) found that women participation in larger parties is limited in patriarchal society.

Election of Women through Prescribed Representations and Quotas

It is observed by the UNDP and UN Women (UNDP, 2015, p. 66) that plus eighty countries have legislated temporary special measures (TSMs) or permanent legislation in the form of gender quotas, which are aimed at increasing the number of elected women to decision-making bodies, notably parliaments.

Quotas are accredited by Vetten (Vetten, 2016, p. 4) for possessing an ability to alter the quantum of representativity of women at face value. Vetten (Vetten, 2016) is however skeptical about the ability of quotas to address the conditions of women. In their expert point of view on women's representation Brechenmaker, Mann, and Meadows (Brechenmaker *et al.*, 2021) argue that an increased number of women in elected office is insufficient and does not necessarily translate nor does it equate to increased power to women. This necessitates the adoption of policies that empower women and provide a guarantee for gender equality.

Of course, the above view does not seek to deflate the bubble of an increase in women in elected office but to indicate that it is one vehicle to achieve the greater goal of increasing women in decision-making across all fronts. An observation is made by the IPU (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021, p. 2) that where quotas set for women's representation in parliament are removed, an immediate decline in the number of women elected in parliament declines. This became visible in Burkina Faso and Kuwait during the 2020 elections. The quotas are thus seen as an effective control measure for increased participation of women in electoral office. Whilst the United Nations

(United Nations, 2021, p. 37) notes that countries that have exceeded the 40% female representation in their parliaments were using gender quotas. The key question is whether these number translates into institution dealing with the Gender business properly without fear of retribution from the society that elected them.

Challenges Affecting Women Election

Media

According to Caul-Kittilson and Fridkin (Caul-Kittilson, 2008, p. 371), a research observation was made that in the USA that men and women candidates are often covered differently by the press. There is a perceived media bias toward male candidates compared to women. As a result, a conclusion is reached that women are accorded lesser media coverage compared to men in America.

Gender Stereo Types and Discrimination

The UN identifies the location of the polling stations as a prohibiting factor, especially where the polling stations are remote and not safely accessible (UNDP & UN Women, 2015, p. 73). This may result in women being unable to participate in an election. This becomes a form of unfair discrimination against women. It is observed in Kenya by Ndirangu, Onkware, and Chitere (Ndirangu *et al.*, 2017, p. 745) that limited access to education and learning plus discriminative societal norms provide the bases for exclusion and barrier that prevents women from participating in electoral office.

In addition, Ndirangu, Onkware, and Chitere (Ndirangu *et al.*, 2017) also identify cultural practices as an additional barrier to women's participation within the African continent. It is observed that a number of African communities' practices tend to negate the role of women in mainstream political leadership regarding them only as homemakers thus restricting them to the roles reserved for women. Patriarchy is the main condition that prevents women's participation and election into electoral office (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2021, p. 6).

Difficult Registration Processes

Independent women candidates may not be able to contest elections in countries where registration fees are due from each candidate. The UNDP and UN Women (United Nations Women, 2015, p. 65)

argue that high candidate registration fees affect the participation of women in the election, especially rural and poor women. This summarily hinders the election of women into public office thus affecting the goals of increasing women's representation in decision-making structures.

The issue of huge nomination fees demanded by political parties that hinder women's participation in politics is also raised by Ndirangu, Onkware, and Chitere (Ndirangu *et al.*, 2017, p. 745). Women are unemployed or less economically active in third-world or underdeveloped societies. It would become difficult to raise funds for election registration as it may compete with other priorities including feeding and maintaining the family. The choice would be obvious as the family would take precedence over politics.

Violence and Abuse Against Women

The IPU (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020) identifies violence against women in politics, including many forms of online harassment and abuse as other barriers to increased women's representation in the electoral office. The UN Women (United Nations Women, 2020, p. 7) also identifies violence against women in politics as a barrier to women's participation and a violation of human rights. Violence limits the rights and opportunities for Women to make political choices without undue influence and pressure thus violating their human rights and freedoms.

The UN Women (United Nations Women, 2020, p. 10) further observes that women were exposed to both physical and psychological forms of violence and this is associated with sexual undertones used to denigrate the personality of women candidates during elections. There is continuous exposure to cyberbullying and threats to families and blackmail. As a result, women opt to stay out of electoral politics to protect their image from humiliation and families from torcher resulting from pressure mainly from the opposite sex.

Discussions

There is progress in the percentage of women serving in the electoral office. The almost 17.1% increase to 28.8% (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022, p. 1) from 11.7% in 1999 cannot go unnoticed. The Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, etc.) were seen observed by (Wangnerud, 2009,

p. 55) as leading with the percentage of women in electoral office at 41.4% then. Sweden, Denmark, and Norway are reflected in table 1.3 of this paper ranking amongst the highest percentage holder above 40% on average. However, none of them have reached the 50% parity mark.

The representation of Women elected into electoral office is very low in Asia, especially in Sri Lanka, Kuwait, and Iran which is less than six percent on average. India is significantly ahead of these other countries as it currently stands at 14.36% women representation in the lower house (Lok Sabha) and 10.2% women representation in the upper house (Rajya Sabha).

To this end, women with low women representation are seen to be less interested in addressing the plight of women. In Iran Esmalian (2020) notes that there are no legal barriers to the election of women but it has not been a practice in many regions. As a result, only 95 women have been elected between 1979 and 2020 in Iran. This low number of elected women in four decades is a clear indicator of Iran's position on the election of women into public office. The key challenge is how the country is socialised, the religious and cultural stereotypes, contribute immensely to the exclusion of women in the electoral process.

Recommended Interventions for Increased Women in the Electoral Office

The current status quo cannot be left unattended. The pace of increasing women into electoral office is far too slow to bear. If things are left to continue at this pace, it will take decades to achieve 50% parity between elected men and women in the national parliament. There is a need to continue with advocacy and campaigns but the targets can also be tightened through laws and regulations that would ensure that women are accorded equal representation across parliaments and their political parties.

The following interventions are therefore important for the increased women's representation in electoral office:

- Institutionalising quotas for women's representation across all the states.
- Continuous training of women on leadership

and electoral processes to prepare them for contesting elections.

- Adoption of special measures to protect women candidates from harassment during constituency elections.
- Reduction of exorbitant electoral fees prohibiting the participation of poor women as independent candidates during elections.
- Gender sensitisation of Media Houses to eliminate the bias toward Male candidates compared to Female Candidates during elections.
- Political parties adopting policies favourable to the election of women into parliaments
- Replacement of Women Public representatives where a seat is lost in the Mid- term.
- Mobilisation against cultural and religious discrimination hindering the election of women into parliament.
- Adoption of a Peer Review Mechanism on the election of Women into the electoral office to promote 50% gender parity across all parliaments.
- Adoption of Anti-Harassment policies by parliaments to protect elected women from harassment by their male counterparts.
- Increased access to voting stations in rural communities to minimise traveling distances for women.

Conclusion

Whilst this study has affirmed the progress in the increase of women in the electoral office it has also confirmed that the progress is still minimal. An average of twenty- five percent (25%) of women in parliaments across the globe is still far from achieving 50% parity. Key among the obstacles that should be eliminated is the violence and harassment meted out against women during elections (Apap, *et al.*, 2019, p. 4).

It is recommended by Her Excellency Dr. Joyce Banda that countries should allocate resources for capacitating women to be prepared for electoral campaigns and create favourable ground for young women to participate in politics (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2021, p. 5).

The election of women into electoral office may not equate to gender sensitivity and equality in a country.

Nor may it result in immediate prioritisation of women's interests. However, the election of women remains a yardstick and an indicator of the status of the rights of women and gender equality in each society. Of course, there is significant progress yet, more needs to be done.

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