



The Changing Face of Africa's Legislatures: Women and Quotas

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Nowhere in the world has the rate of increase in the political representation of women been as fast as in Sub-Saharan Africa over the past four decades. The number of women legislators increased tenfold between 1960 and 2003, jumping from one percent in 1960 to 14.3 percent in 2003. The largest increase came between 1990 and 2003 when the number of seats held by women rose from eight percent to 14.3 percent. Rwanda became the country with the highest female legislative representation in 2003, as the women of that country claimed 48.8 percent of parliamentary seats – surpassing the Nordic countries.

One of the main factors accounting for this increase has to do with the expanded use of various forms of quotas. In part, these quotas result from pressure applied by women's movements in African countries, as well as by international women's movements. They are a product of changing international norms regarding female representation, as evident in various United Nations (UN) conventions and resolutions and in relation to the legislative targets set by key African regional organizations like the African Union, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). With the rise of multi-partyism and the decline of mass women's organizations tied to the single party, there was a need to find new symbolic ways to appeal to women voters as well as to create new bases for patronage networks. In some predominantly Muslim countries, the women's quota became part of an effort to contain the growing influence of Islamists.

Quotas fall into two main categories in Africa. One includes reserved seats or executive appointments that are intended to determine the number of seats to be held by women in an election. Women may run for reserved seats in their districts and can be elected either by an electoral college of men and women (Uganda), or by women in each district/province (Rwanda). Another variant of the reserved seats system is the women-only list in which only women can vie for these seats on a nationwide basis regardless of party affiliation or district. In Tanzania, a reserved seat quota for women is allocated to political parties based on the proportional number of parliamentary seats won in an election.

The second category involves measures adopted voluntarily by political parties aimed at influencing the number of women candidates (for example, placing women higher on the party list, alternating women and men). Sometimes the adoption of national legislation or constitutional mandates requires that all parties nominate a certain number of women as electoral candidates.

Table 1: Countries where one or both parties with largest number of legislative seats have quota or target

Country	% Women mandated by quota	Year quota introduced	% Women in legislature in 2003
Burkina Faso*			
Alliance pour la démocratie et la fédération (ADF)	25	2002	11.7
Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (CPD)	25	2002	
Cameroon			
Cameroon People's Democratic Movement	25–30	1996	8.9
Côte d'Ivoire			
Ivorian Popular Front	30	-	8.5
Mali			
Alliance for Democracy	30	-	10.2
Mozambique			
Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Frelimo)	30	1994	30.0
Namibia (targets)			
South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO)	50	1997	29.2
Congress of Democrats	50	1999	
Senegal			
Senegalese Democratic Party	33	2001	19.2
South Africa			
African National Congress	33	1994	29.8
Tunisia			
Democratic Constitutional Rally	20	-	11.5

* Election not yet held under new quota arrangement.

Table 2: Countries with Quotas Mandated by Legislature or Constitution

Country	Type of quota	% Women mandated by quota	Year quota introduced	% Women in legislature in 2003
Djibouti	Reserved seats	10.0	2002	10.8
Eritrea	Reserved seats	30.0	1995	22.0
Kenya	Executive nomination	3.0	1997	7.1
Morocco	Women-only national list*	10.0	2002	10.8
Niger***	10% elective 25% nominative	35.0	2000	1.2
Rwanda	Reserved seats	30.0	2003	48.8
Somalia Transitional National Government	Women-only lists*	10.0	2001	10.0
Sudan	Reserved seat	9.7	2000	9.7
Tanzania	Special seats**	20.0	2000	22.3
Uganda	Reserved seat	17.0	1989	24.7

* Only women can vie for these seats regardless of party affiliation, not based on constituency as with reserved seats.

** The special seat quota for women is allocated to political parties based on the proportional number of parliamentary seats won in an election.

*** Election not yet held under new quota arrangement.

Cross-national studies of women's representation have to date largely ignored the impact of such legislative quotas.¹ One explanation for this omission may have to do with the fact that the phenomenon is new in much of Africa and Latin America. With the increased adoption of quotas in Latin America since the 1990s and in Africa since 1995, the findings of these earlier studies need to be modified to take account not only of quotas, but also of women's movements that have advocated for these changes in domestic and international norms.

Characteristics of Countries Adopting Quotas

By 2003, approximately 19 African countries had adopted some form of legislative quotas for women; some, like Angola, had plans to adopt quotas, while others, like the Gambia, Kenya and Nigeria, were engaged in ongoing debates on quotas. With a few exceptions, the majority of the countries with quotas had adopted them after 1995, which was the year that the UN Conference on Women was held in Beijing. The countries and parties that introduced quotas often cited the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 1995 UN Conference on Women in Beijing and the Beijing Platform for Action, which laid out guidelines for increasing the political representation of women. These were clear indications of the impact of the international women's movement on the adoption of quotas in Africa. Only three African countries with quotas in 2003 had adopted them prior to 1995. This excludes the adoption of a quota for ten women by the Convention People's Party in Ghana in 1960 and the introduction of eight percent quotas in Egypt between 1979 and 1986.

In those African countries with quotas, on average, 17 percent of legislative seats were held by women, compared with nine percent of seats in countries without quotas. Those countries with reserved seats of over 20 percent or where the ruling party or top two parties had targets or quotas of over 20 percent were able to raise female representation in the legislature to 23 percent.

A number of countries with quotas recently emerged from civil wars (Eritrea, Mozambique, Rwanda, Somalia and Uganda) or wars of liberation (Namibia and South Africa) after which they drew up new constitutions and re-established their parliaments from scratch. Similarly, countries with quotas in Africa are more likely to be newly independent states: hence, they are also countries where women most recently got the right to vote and to run for office. Africa is different from other parts of the world in this respect, where the end of conflict and the lateness of independence have not mattered as much. In Africa, the end of major turmoil and conflict meant that there was greater openness in relation to creating new rules that included female leadership. Moreover, women were not contending with entrenched male incumbents as they sought political representation. Female quotas have generally been difficult to introduce when they have meant ousting a male incumbent from his seat, especially in places where large numbers of incumbents are usually re-elected. Therefore, it has been easier to introduce quotas in situations where women could compete for vacant seats – newly recreated parliaments (after a civil conflict) provided such a venue.

Some of the countries that have adopted quotas have left leaning parties in power: Eritrea, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa. Seychelles also had a left leaning party in power in 1991 when it had female representation of 46 percent, suggesting that some kind of informal preferential treatment was applied within the party in regard to the selection of candidates. Overall, however, there is no particular relationship between left leaning parties and the adoption of quotas in Africa.

Many of the countries with quotas have the most active women's movements in Africa (Botswana, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda), while approximately one-third of the countries have relatively weak women's movements (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire and Djibouti), co-opted women's movements (Eritrea) or suppressed women's movements (Sudan). If the number of women's organizations attending the Beijing conference in 1995 is taken as a rough indicator of the strength of the women's movement, countries with quotas tended to have more of these organizations at the conference.

In many parts of the world, the electoral system is said to influence women's ability to gain legislative representation. Of the eight countries with female representation of over 20 percent in Africa (Rwanda, Mozambique, South Africa, Namibia, Uganda, Tanzania, Seychelles, Eritrea), all but one have quotas and six have party list systems and five have proportional representation systems (see Table 3). In Africa more generally, about 33 percent have party list proportional representation; 31 percent have first-past-the-post (FPTP) plurality systems; 18 percent have two round majority systems and ten percent have FPTP semi-proportional systems.

Table 3: Countries with legislative quotas or political party quotas over 20 percent for women

Country	Month/ year of last election	Size of legislature	Number of women in legislature	Women in legislature (%)	Quota over 20%	Electoral System
Rwanda	11/2003	80	39	48.8	Yes	Party list proportional
Mozambique	12/1999	250	75	30.0	Yes	Party list proportional
South Africa	06/1999	399	119	29.8	Yes	Party list proportional
Uganda	06/2001	304	75	24.7	Yes	FPTP plurality
Tanzania	10/2000	274	61	22.3	Yes	FPTP plurality
Eritrea	02/1994	150	33	22.0	Yes	Party list proportional
Senegal	04/2001	120	23	19.2	Yes	Parallel party bloc and semi-proportional
Mali	07/2002	147	15	10.2	Yes	Two round system majority
Cameroon	06/2002	180	16	8.9	Yes	Parallel FPTP semi-proportional

The countries that have adopted quotas divide evenly into three categories in regard to regime type: democratic, semi-authoritarian, and authoritarian. This suggests that regime type in Africa does not determine whether countries are more or less likely to adopt quotas, although democratic countries with quotas average some four percentage points more in terms of female representation in parliament than semi-authoritarian and authoritarian regimes with quotas. About 23 of Africa's states would fall into the semi-authoritarian regime category based on Freedom House data, and, of these, nine have some form of legislative quota for women (Uganda, Tanzania, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Niger, Morocco). In the nine African countries that would be considered democratic according to Freedom House, three have quotas (South Africa, Mali and Ghana) and Namibia has local level quotas. Finally, of the nine authoritarian regimes, four have quotas (Rwanda, Eritrea, Cameroon and Sudan). In other words, around half of the countries representing each regime type have some kind of quota. If one compares countries with and without quotas, differences regarding democratic status and civil and political liberties are minimal. However, the more democratic leaning countries in Africa (Botswana, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Senegal and South Africa) have tended to prefer quotas or targets set by parties themselves rather than adopting reserved seats or quotas mandated by legislatures or constitutions.

Countries adopting quotas include the wealthiest in Africa, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, as well as the poorest, including Cameroon, Eritrea, Mali, Mozambique and Tanzania. Generally, though, the countries with quotas tend to be less wealthy with gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of approximately \$2,646, compared with \$3,361 for those without quotas, according to figures from the UNDP *Human Development Report 2003*. Countries that have the highest rates of female representation in parliament (over 20 percent), however, do have, on average, higher per capita GDP (\$4,433) than those with lower rates of female representation (\$3,315).

About half of the countries adopting quotas have a population of 50 percent or more that considers itself Muslim, although in several of the predominantly Muslim nations like Djibouti, Somalia and Sudan, the quotas are relatively small (ten percent). Nevertheless, overall, countries with quotas are less likely to have a high percentage of Muslims or Catholics and are more likely to have higher Protestant populations when compared with countries without quotas. Female representation rates in predominantly Muslim states still tend to be lower than those of other countries in Africa.

Factors Giving Rise to Quotas

Domestic women's movements

Women's movements have been closely associated with the adoption of quota systems in most African countries. The best documented cases of pressure applied by women's movements in regard to quotas are to be found in southern Africa. In South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) Women's League spearheaded the initiative to increase female representation in parliament, achieving a 30 percent quota.² In Namibia, before the 1999 National Assembly elections, a coalition of women's organizations and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the Namibian Women's Manifesto Network (NWMN), convinced several parties to adopt resolutions providing for party lists in which 50 percent of the candidates were women, resulting in 26.4 percent female representation in parliament in 1999, a jump from 12.5 percent in 1994.³ (More women would have been elected had the parties stuck to their resolutions. For example, only 20 of the ruling party's 72 candidates were women). In September 2000, the NWMN launched the 50/50 Campaign to fight for 50 percent female representation in the legislature. The Parliamentary Women's Caucus and the Namibia Elected Women Forum (including elected women from the local, regional and national levels) have also been involved in this campaign.

International Women's Movements

Another factor giving rise to the increased adoption of quotas has been pressure from international bodies. Not only did pressure come from international conferences like the 1995 UN Conference on Women in Beijing, but it was also applied throughout the region. Women activists pressed regional bodies within Africa to pressure member states to increase female representation. The African Union's 2003 Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa calls for equal gender representation, as do the 1997 SADC Declaration on Gender and Development and the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance of ECOWAS. There have also been efforts to bring about one-third female representation in these regional bodies themselves. The East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) has a provision for one-third female representation and the ECOWAS Female Parliamentary Association (ECOFEPA) is working to increase the number of parliamentarians in that organization.

Diffusion factor

Another related explanation for the adoption of quotas is the diffusion factor, both from country to country and also within countries.⁴ It is especially evident within countries in Africa. If one party adopts quotas, other parties may feel compelled to do the same lest they lose the votes of women. During the 2001 parliamentary elections in Senegal, a group of women's organizations instigated a Citizen Campaign to address the under-representation of

women in parliament. They sought to reverse a situation in which only 19 of 140 legislators (13.5 percent) had been women.⁵ In an unprecedented development, the majority of the 25 political parties in Senegal fielded over 20 percent female candidates in national lists in the run-up to the 2001 parliamentary elections, with the list of the Parti Démocratique Sénégalais (PDS) amounting to over 33 percent.⁶ As a result, women ended up with 19.2 percent of the seats in Senegal, an increase of about six percent.

Symbolic appeal

Quotas sometimes served as symbolic gestures to appeal to women voters. In a multi-party context, some countries sought new methods of winning the political allegiance of women voters after the demise of the single parties and their attendant mass women's organizations. With the proliferation of independent women's organizations, the use of quotas became a way to indicate support for women and women interested in political representation.

Creating new lines of patronage politics

In some countries, the introduction of quotas was linked to the attempt to create new state patronage networks. Uganda is a country that has adopted female legislative quotas in response to pressure from a vibrant women's movement to increase the number of female political leaders. By 2003, women held 25 percent (77) of the seats in parliament. The use of reserved seats – one seat that only women compete for in each of Uganda's 56 districts – has contributed to a change in the political culture. Today, by and large, the population accepts women as public figures.

Many women parliamentarians, however, owe their positions to President Yoweri Museveni and the existing system of patronage. While the relatively large number of women in parliament is an indication of the success of lobbying by women for greater representation, many of the elected women officials have been restrained from supporting women's issues. As one activist explained to me in 2002: 'Our voice has been hijacked at the highest organs, at parliament. Our voice there has been killed'. Some argue that the affirmative action seats in parliament have created a group of legislators more beholden to the regime in their loyalties than to the cause of women's emancipation.⁷

One factor that accounts for the consolidation of parliamentary loyalties is the fact that the District Women Representatives in parliament are elected by an electoral college of roughly 200 people who can potentially be manipulated via bribery and vote buying. Other interest groups (youth, disabled, and workers) with special reserved seats in parliament directly elect their own representatives through their own organizations. Women District Representatives, however, are not representatives *of* women, but, rather, they are women representatives of the district, which has translated into a different mode of election for the women representatives. Efforts to open up the election process to universal suffrage were voted down as a result of pressure applied by the president, who argued that it would be too difficult for women to canvass votes across an entire district.⁸ Many of the women parliamentarians who have been elected to the reserved seats have been used to vote for anti-democratic legislation (such as the 2002 Political Parties and Organizations Bill) and against legislation that would promote women's rights (such as the co-ownership amendment to the 1998 Land Act).

Thus, the introduction of quotas in Uganda served many purposes. It signalled to ordinary women the government's commitment to women's leadership and opened up new avenues for women to become political leaders. At the same time, it created a bloc of loyalist women who could be used when needed to suppress various demands of the women's movement or of democrats when they ran counter to government wishes.

Conclusion

The introduction of legislative quotas in Africa has served multiple purposes for different actors. Women's movements, domestic and international, have sought legislative quotas to increase the representation of women. Parties have sometimes introduced quotas under pressure from other parties to keep up with their competitors. Governments, in turn, have often sought quotas for symbolic reasons to appeal to women voters and to signal an interest in women's rights and voices. They may be responding to changing international norms regarding female representation, but they may also be seeking to create a modern image for themselves in order to challenge more conservative societal forces, including Islamist movements in predominantly Muslim countries (Morocco and Tunisia, for example). In other instances, government leaders may be seeking to create new lines of patronage and to ensure loyal support as old networks become problematic or threatening (Rwanda and Uganda). Future research should explore these varying reasons why countries adopt legislative quotas for women. It is essential that quotas be introduced in a manner that keeps women's interests at the core and that the terms are acceptable to women.

Notes and References

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- ⁷ Tamale, S. 1999. *When Hens Begin to Crow: Gender and Parliamentary Politics in Uganda*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- ⁸ Gawayia-Tegulle, T. 2001. 'Electoral College: A Shield for Non-Performing MPs'. *The Other Voice* (Kampala). p. 2.

Further Reading

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