Participation of Women in Public and Political Decision-making

“We are aware as a result of our fortitude and struggle that there are fortresses of political resistance to this new force of women leadership but we are certain that the wind of change that has hit the west coast of Africa will blow strongly”. Speech by President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf at the opening of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) Seminar on “Women and Parliament”, 26 September 2006, in Accra, Ghana.

Background

Female participation in public and political decision-making is one of the three thematic focus areas of the African Women’s Rights Observatory (AWRO). AWRO will work to retrieve, compile, analyze and disseminate quantitative and qualitative information about women and decision-making in Africa by focusing on public and political decision-making positions and relevant emerging issues and data. The Observatory will also launch interactive forums to garner feedback and expand dialogue about concerns in these areas.

The participation of women in political decision-making positions was recognized as a political right after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. UDHR Articles 2 and 21 stipulate equal enjoyment of political rights without discrimination on the basis of one’s sex or any other ground. In 1966, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) reaffirmed the UDHR principle of the right to participate in public and political life without discrimination.

Despite the principles enshrined in the UDHR and ICCPR, discrimination against women regarding voting and holding political office has persisted around the world. In order to address overt discrimination, it became necessary for the United Nations to adopt a convention dedicated to protecting the political rights of women. Hence, the Convention on the Political Rights of Women was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 1952. This Convention, one of
the early covenants adopted in the area of women’s rights promotion and protection, affirms the right of women to vote and hold public office without discrimination.

The Political Rights Convention was followed by the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which the UNGA adopted in 1979. CEDAW moved the right of political participation another step toward *de facto* equality by affirming the obligation of State Parties to take affirmative action to accelerate the participation of women in politics and their representation in other public decision-making positions. Currently, almost all African countries have ratified CEDAW except for Sudan and Somalia.

The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the African Women’s Rights Protocol) adopted in 2003 by the African Union (AU) further affirms the principle of equal participation and the use of affirmative action to ensure equal and effective participation of women in politics. By June 2009, the Protocol was ratified by 27 countries and signed by 45 African countries.

Important resolutions and development frameworks such as the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action (BDPA) and the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 also call for gender parity in decision-making. For instance, under the MDG framework, the proportion of seats held by women in the national parliament is one of the three indicators used to measure progress toward achieving Goal 3, that is, to promote gender equality and empower women.

**Thresholds and targeted decision-making positions**

It is important to understand the thresholds and targets set by various regional and international legal and policy frameworks. A table in the resources section under AWRO’s publications describes different frameworks’ required commitments and stated goals. The table provides specific information on thresholds and commitments to ensure accurate reference to States’ commitments and encourage continued lobbying in areas lacking clear commitments. It is noteworthy that the BDPA and the South African Development Community (SADC) Declaration of 2008 are the only two instruments that mandate equal participation of women in decision-making positions in the private sector. Most legal and policy frameworks intend public participation to mean satisfactory representation of women in government offices.
It should also be noted that specific numerical reference, i.e. 50%, is found in the SADC Declaration. However, the principle of gender parity stipulated by AU has delivered results, at least at the level of the African Union Commission (AUC). There are more women commissioners (7) than men commissioners (4), with a women representation rate of 63.63%.\(^1\)

The BDPA further encourages governments to set their own targets for public offices and requires the creation of a “critical mass of women” participating in private, political, non-governmental, inter-governmental and other sectors.

Gwen Mahlangu-Nkabinde, South Africa's previous Speaker of Parliament and now an ordinary MP, dances with a group of activists at the opening of Parliament in February 2009 (Photo: Parliament of South Africa)

**The status of women’s participation**

Participation of women in public decision-making is one of the areas in which progress has been made in Africa. Rwanda became a shining example by achieving gender parity, interpreted as the 50% goal set by the AU Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality. At 56% women representation in parliament, Rwanda is also the global leader. For this achievement, the President of Rwanda has received several awards, most recently at the International Colloquium on Women’s Empowerment, Leadership, Development, International Peace and Security in Monrovia, Liberia from 7-8 March, 2009.

Six other African countries have achieved 30% representation, usually interpreted as fulfilling the “critical mass” threshold set by the BDPA. These countries include South Africa, (45) Angola (37.3%) Mozambique (34.8%), Uganda (30.7%) Burundi (30.5%) and the United Republic of Tanzania (30.4%). South

Africa witnessed a 12% increase in women’s representation in parliament, from 33% to 45%, during the April 2009 elections. South Africa is on track to achieve the 50% target set for 2015 according to the 2008 SADAC Declaration. Countries with over 20% representation rate include Eritrea, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Mauritania, Namibia, Seychelles, Senegal and Tunisia.

Countries that have made progress have either instituted affirmative action/quotas in their constitutions or adopted rules to enforce gender quotas in their dominant parties. For instance, in Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, constitutional provisions established quotas to ensure women’s representation mostly within the range of 30%. In South Africa, the Municipal Structure Act established a 50% quota for local government while the African National Congress (ANC) established a 30% quota at the level of parliament. Similarly, in Mozambique, the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique adopted a 30% quota for women.

In Africa, there is modest progress in women’s representation in the executive branch. Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became the first woman Head of State in modern Africa when she assumed power in 2003. Further, the number of women Ministers has increased in countries such as South Africa (44.8%), Cape Verde (35.7%) and Lesotho (31.6%).

Representation of women remains quite low in the private sector, however. The average representation rates of women in parliament, ministerial positions and senior management positions in private firms are approximately 16%, 19% and 7.3% respectively in sub-Saharan African countries (SSA).

This section of the website provides information on women in public and political decision-making. When available, data on women in the private sector will also

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5 Ibid. Data updated until February 2009.
be provided. The section is organized into two parts. The first section deals with monitoring and consolidates quantitative data on selected indicators for individual African countries. The second section focuses on the experiences of African countries in dealing with issues of women and decision-making. This includes best practices in legislative and policy environments, plans of action developed and programmes designed, institutional mechanisms established and efforts exerted on monitoring and evaluation of operations and outcomes as well as monitoring and evaluation of issues and challenges faced in realizing women’s right to equal participation in governance. There is a common section where comparative qualitative data are presented to assess the progress being made by African countries.
## Treaty Commitments to Enhancing Participation of Women in Decision-making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Convention/Declaration</th>
<th>Targeted decision-making positions</th>
<th>Percentage (explicit or implied)</th>
<th>Affirmative action measure: provided or not</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) <em>(Articles 4, 7 and 8)</em></td>
<td>Political and other levels of public and government offices with specific reference to representation in diplomatic service and international organizations</td>
<td>Without discrimination and on “equal terms with men”</td>
<td>Affirmative action provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The African Women’s Protocol <em>(Article 9)</em></td>
<td>Political decision-making</td>
<td>Equal representation</td>
<td>Affirmative action measure provided</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 3. Beijing Declaration and Platform Action (BDPA) 1) *Strategic objective 190 G.1 a*  
   2) *Strategic objective 192* | Government bodies, public administrative entities and the Judiciary  
   Private sector political parties, academic institutions, non-governmental organizations and international organizations                                                                                                                                 | Calls on Governments to set specific targets with the “view to achieving equal representation of men and women” | Affirmative action provided |
| 4. AU Solemn Declaration *(Number 5)* | Reaffirms the gender parity principle adopted for representation of women in the decision-making structure of AUC and all other organs of the AU including NEPAD, regional economic communities (RECs) and at national and local levels | “Gender parity”                                                                             |                                            |
levels. In collaboration with political parties and national parliaments.

| 5. SADC Declaration on Gender and Development (Article 5 and 12(1)) | Public and private sectors | “At least 50% by 2015” | Affirmative Action provided |

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6 Promotion of gender equality is one of the principles of the Constitutive Act of the African Union Charter (Article 4). The AUC Decision on Gender Party was taken at the Inaugural Session of the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government in July 2002 in Durban, South Africa. Under the AU Charter, the organs of the Union include the Assembly, Executive Council, the Pan-African Parliament, the Court of Justice, The Permanent Representatives Committee, the Specialized Technical Committees, the Economic, Social and Cultural Council, the Financial Institutions and other organs the Assembly may decide to establish. (Constitutive Act of the African Union, Article 5).