## Helpdesk Research Report

# Elected women's effectiveness at representing women's interests

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## Question

*What is the evidence on effectiveness of women elected in Africa in representing women's interests once in power? What lessons are there on what can make them more responsive to their constituency/women in particular?*

## Contents

## 1. Overview

This rapid literature review collates evidence on women's actions and interactions in parliaments in Africa. Having a quota to reserve a certain number of seats for women is increasingly common, and this has increased the numbers of women in parliaments. The debate, however, is now turning to look at how effective these women are at representing women's interests once they are in power. This report treats 'effectiveness' in terms of whether they are representing women's interests or a wider gender equality agenda, and whether they are having an impact on improving gender relations both within parliament, in legislation and policy, and in communities.

There is a newly emerging evidence base on this topic. Most studies are qualitative, to assess perceptions of change, and many are rigorously conducted and published in peer-reviewed journals. Most work has been conducted in Western case study countries (Pearson, 2008; Yoon, 2011). The literature on Africa mostly focuses on Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda and Tanzania (Bauer, 2012). There are several consistent findings from African countries, which enables drawing together key lessons:

Effectiveness at representing women's interests:

- The presence of women in parliaments has contributed to a more women-friendly atmosphere, and resultantly it has become **easier to raise gender issues** in most countries.
- Women report a **change in attitudes of male MPs**, and a shift towards acceptance of women in leadership positions.
- There have been significant gains in **gender equality legislation** in several African countries; but on the whole, **policies are not progressive**.

Factors which influence effectiveness are:

- Whether there is a **women's caucus[1] or cross-party women's representation**. This facilitates discussing women's issues in a positive environment.
- Whether women are **united on gender equality goals**. Some women expressed solidarity with other women as their main driving force.
- Whether **party loyalty, or ethnic, religious, or cultural identity** takes precedence over women's representation.
- Whether women are in **senior positions of power and influence**. Mostly women remain in the lower echelons of power.
- Whether there is **male support** for issues. This can be critical to pass legislation.

Lessons on responsiveness:

- **Partnerships and relationships with civil society** can help create a broad base of support. Many women have strong connections with the grassroots, which helps them represent their views in parliament.
- **Political systems** can constrain women's ability to be responsive to women constituencies. Some women are constrained by the need to follow party direction and cannot advocate for women's rights.
- Donors support women largely by funding **capacity-building and training**.

## 2. Women's effectiveness at representing women's interests

On the whole, women have an increased profile and representation in African politics, but this has not translated into women-friendly policies and practice (Devlin & Elgie, 2008; Wang, 2013). This section outlines some areas where there is evidence that women have had an impact.

### Changing attitudes and practices

There are broadly consistent findings that increased numbers of women in parliament leads to an **atmosphere which is more women-friendly**, and therefore more receptive to women's issues in the internal workings of government (Devlin & Elgie, 2008). Literature examining Africa identifies perceptions that women's political representation has contributed to women's public freedom of speech in general, confidence, moral authority, and changed attitudes towards women's leadership (Bauer, 2012).

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[1] A caucus is a meeting of officials with shared affinities who advocate collectively on policy.

In Rwanda, the increased number of women in parliament has resulted in an atmosphere where female MP interviewees reported feeling more comfortable, confident and 'at home' (Devlin & Elgie, 2008). This is identified as an important part of the normalisation of women in parliament, which creates a conducive atmosphere to raising women's issues (Devlin & Elgie, 2008). Rwandan women's visibility in public office provides a role model and demonstration to other women that they can have an impact on politics (Pearson, 2008).

The increased number of women in the Tanzanian parliament has led to an increase in the number of questions women ask in debates, which Yoon (2011) argues reflects an increased voice of female MPs. The continued presence of women in politics and their competent performance and leadership has resulted in a cultural change of attitudes (Yoon, 2011). Over time, the Tanzanian female MPs have found that male MPs have become more willing to engage with women and women's issues; the atmosphere has changed from one of opposition to a collaborative working environment (Yoon, 2011). One special-seat female MP stated that male MPs have gradually changed their attitudes to female MPs, and have begun to accept them as equals (Yoon, 2011).

Despite the lack of significant progress on gender equality policies in Burundi, an opinion poll (Sow, 2012) showed that respondents believed the higher number of women in politics was changing attitudes towards women's leadership and the social status of women.

In some cases, women have used this atmosphere to **change government working practices** – usually to support family responsibilities. For example, in South Africa, the parliamentary calendar was matched to the school calendar (Devlin & Elgie, 2008). However, in other examples, like the Rwandan parliament, a study shows that women did not express any desire to change working practices, as they saw them as normal (Devlin & Elgie, 2008).

## Changing government policy

Changing policy may be the best measure of whether women are having an impact in parliament. The literature reviews whether changes in policy and legislation demonstrate progressive gender equality, and whether this was influenced by women parliamentarians.

There are several examples of successful lobbying or leadership to change policy in favour of women's rights:

- In South Africa, women parliamentarians have successfully changed some policies directly affecting women, on abortion and employment equality (Devlin & Elgie, 2008).

- The Tanzanian women's caucus and standing committees[2] have been successful in passing several laws relevant to gender equality: on land, labour, sexual offences and maternity leave (Yoon, 2011).

- The 2010 Domestic Violence bill in Uganda marked a significant gain for women's rights in legislation (Wang, 2012). This was passed due to a strong collaboration between the women's caucus and civil society, formal and informal advocacy, and media coverage (Wang, 2012).

- In Burundi, women parliamentarians passed several provisions important for gender equality: reforming the penal code in 2009 to give a clearer definition of rape and gender-based violence; and making domestic violence punishable by law (Sow, 2012).

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[2] Standing committees are permanent and regular cross-party committees meeting on a specific issue.

- An important law on the Prevention, Protection and Punishment of Any Gender-Based Violence (GBV) was passed in Rwanda in 2006, drafted and introduced by the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians, of which all women in parliament are members (Pearson, 2008). Pearson (2008) identifies the following success factors: close collaboration with civil society; a national conference; mass media campaign which broadcast debates with experts on GBV across the nation; soliciting opinion from constituencies (including male MPs visiting their constituencies); general public consultations; draft law introduced by four men and four women rather than all women.

Devlin and Elgie (2008) identify that policy is the area most resistant to gender effects. Beyond the GBV bill, gender-positive changes in Rwandan legislation mostly happened before parliament reached 50 per cent representation in 2003. The authors suggest that the most important factor for changing government policy is therefore the **commitment of the leadership to gender equality**, rather than the number of women or parliamentary lobbying.

# 3. Factors influencing effectiveness

## Women's caucus

There is strong consistency in the literature that women's cross-party caucuses are highly effective at enabling women's participation in parliaments (Bauer, 2012; Wang, 2012; Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2013). This is seen as helping to overcome party politics and unite women (Wang, 2012).

The Ugandan women's caucus (Uganda Women Parliamentary Association (UWOPA)) has been prominent in passing pro-women legislation. It is organised, active, has strategic plans, a secretariat with full-time coordinator, meets regularly, and produces regular updates (Wang, 2012). It is generally considered the main vehicle for promoting women's rights in parliament (Wang, 2012). It interacts with other committees to represent gender equality in sectoral areas. Wang (2012) identifies its extensive cross-party membership as key to its success. It is important to note that there are limits to what it can accomplish, and the successful legislation must often stay within bounds of what is acceptable to the ruling party (Muriaas & Wang, 2012).

Rwanda's female MPs also have a representative body, on which all female MPs sit. This gives them a recognised space to discuss women's issues, which has made work on gender issues easier. This caucus has been a strong platform for discussing and promoting women's interests at national level (Pearson, 2008). However, many of the women participating in planning and development processes at the **local level do not have adequate training** in gender awareness and gender mainstreaming, and find it difficult to highlight gender equality issues (Sow, 2012).

The Tanzanian women's caucus offers **training to new female MPs**, on items such as how to participate in debates, how to ask questions, and occasionally offers a mock parliament to help training (Yoon, 2011). It has little funding but is regarded as helpful and supportive (Yoon, 2011). Despite this, female MPs are often under-qualified and have limited capacity and skills, which limits their effectiveness (Yoon, 2011).

South Africa has several cross-party women's bodies for consultation and monitoring, but they are not considered particularly effective currently, due to their disconnected nature, no continuity of focus, lack of a strong leader, lack of follow-up, and administrative problems (Vetten et al., 201; Francis, 2009). When

the gender caucus was successful, in the late 1990s, this was largely due to a strong leader (Vetten et al., 2012).

In South Africa, the dominance of the ruling party the African National Congress (ANC) is highlighted as a reason why female parliamentarians are unable to join the women's group, and in Mozambique there is no women's group at all, which MPs identified as a constraint to their influence over policymaking (Wang, 2012).

## Common goals

Female parliamentarians do not all have a 'women's agenda'. There is little reason to assume that women will push for women's rights or gender equality simply because they are women (Pearson, 2008). However, the literature is consistent in noting that when there is a strong agreement and a common cause, presenting a cross-party united front on specific issues has a strong impact on the ability to pass legislation (Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2013).

In the Rwandan national parliament, female politicians expressed a feeling of **solidarity with other women** which helped them lobby effectively on gender issues (Devlin & Elgie, 2008). These women put women's rights ahead of party politics, and this helped them form a strong lobbying front. There has also been some change on the part of men, who are now more sensitive to gender issues and less resistant to the women's lobbying group (Devlin & Elgie, 2008). This solidarity is an important finding in establishing why the Rwandan parliament has been effective at including women's issues. Pearson (2008) assesses that female Rwandan MPs had strong personal agendas for representing women's issues, slightly more prevalent in those women who were elected to the women's reserved seats. There was a strong sense among interviewees that they felt a responsibility to represent women's interests and be a voice for the grassroots (Pearson, 2008).

Some female legislators in Sudan support gender equity rather than gender equality, demonstrating that women do not necessarily support women's rights or have a feminist agenda, but are **driven by their personal and party beliefs** (Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2013). These women support an Islamist view of gender roles, which has led them to reject the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as conflicting with their constitution and law, and to support Islamist laws on men's and women's behaviour (Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2013).

In Burundi, female MPs are strongly resistant to reforming restrictive inheritance laws, reflecting the broader social context, and have not pushed a gender equality agenda despite capacity training (Domingo et al., 2012). In South Africa, all MPs tend to be divided along ethnic and racial lines, adding another layer of **identity politics** which pits women against each other and prevents them articulating a shared position (Francis, 2009). In South Africa, racial and cultural identities were more important than gender-based ones (Francis, 2009).

## Other loyalties

It is a consistent finding in the literature that female parliamentarians are affected by different identities as well as their status as women. Most often, this is their **party allegiance**. The party is responsible for their position in power, and women very often will vote or lobby only within the boundaries set by the party. This is exacerbated in the many authoritarian or near single-party parliaments in Sub-Saharan Africa, where to push for a different agenda may result in losing the seat. Women are thus constrained by party politics, even if they feel a desire to represent a broader women's agenda.

Primary loyalty to the party is common across Africa, particularly Mozambique and Uganda (Devlin & Elgie, 2008). There is some suggestion in the literature that **women appointed through the quota system may be more loyal to their party** than to any broader agenda, as opposed to non-quota seats and/or women who come from activist organisations (Domingo et al., 2012; Devlin & Elgie, 2008; Wang, 2012). There is no clear evidence on whether this is correct or not, as the opposite is true in Rwanda, where only 54 per cent of female MPs ranked the promotion of party interests as 'very important', compared to 83 per cent of male MPs (Pearson, 2008).

South African women expressed feeling constrained in their work on gender equality by party politics and partisanship (Francis, 2009). Women were unlikely to support one another on issues not supported by their own party (Francis, 2009). Within the parties, women's concerns tend to be represented at a low level of political hierarchy, meaning that they rarely get attention from the party itself (Francis, 2009).

In Tanzania and Burundi, MPs tend to support their party, as the party is responsible for nominating constituency seats and can control the career of MPs (Yoon, 2011; Sow, 2012). In South Africa, the party process for choosing women to nominate is male-dominated, meaning men are still gatekeepers to power (Vetten et al., 2012). Female legislators in Sudan expressed a potential risk if they step outside the ideological boundaries set by the ruling NCP party, and are unwilling to take this risk (Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2013).

In Nigeria, female politicians are often **elites** and represent those interests or identity interests rather than a broad gender equality agenda (Domingo et al., 2012). Their activities are also shaped by the deep ethnic and political divides in the country, and have a tendency to follow party politics (Domingo et al., 2012).

The Ugandan women's caucus appears not to suffer from conflicting party allegiances, as members state they are able to put party politics to the side and work together on gender issues (Wang, 2012). The **ability to work across parties was a positive factor** which enabled UWOPA to be effective. Even in an environment which is otherwise deeply biased along party lines, the gender equality bloc manages to remain united (Muriaas & Wang, 2012).

## Seniority and power

While there are many more women in parliaments in the last decade, they are not always in influential or significant positions. Where they are, this seems to have an impact on how effectively they can push their agendas, although it may also cause them to move away from the grassroots.

At the national level, Rwanda has had a considerable number of women in positions of power and in powerful sectors: the Minister for Gender and Family Promotion; the Minister for Education, Science, Technology and Research; a Minister in the Office of the President; junior ministers in Economic Planning and Cooperation; 60 per cent of vice-presidents and 27 per cent of presidents on standing committees; and one of the two deputy speakers of parliament (Devlin & Elgie, 2008). As the body of women in parliament has matured and become less new, some women have moved away from working on women's issues. The larger number of women has enabled some to become parliamentarians rather than constituency representatives (Devlin & Elgie, 2008). Senior women are thus either finding themselves with more time to visit constituencies and work with the grassroots, or less, as they move into high politics.

At the local level, none of the five Rwandan districts surveyed in Sow (2012) had women in key positions, even though women's representation stood at 40 per cent overall. Women only held leadership positions at the lowest possible level of government, and even then only at 17 per cent. Women were also held to

sectors which draw on women's traditional roles: vice-presidents for social affairs were 80 per cent women; vice-presidents for economic affairs and planning were 80 per cent men.

In Burundi (Sow, 2012) the overall assessment is that women do not have sufficient leverage and power to transform the political system, and struggle to represent women's rights. They do not have quotas for the most senior positions, and each party generally has fewer than 30 per cent women in the decision-making bodies. Women are thus excluded from the highest circles of power and influence and denied opportunities to create networks and voice women's issues. Despite numerical increases in both Burundi and Rwanda, women's influence in politics and policy remains low (Sow, 2012).

Women in Tanzania have successfully pressured the president and parties to include more women in senior positions as ministers (Yoon, 2011).

## Engaging men as allies

Some women have successfully used co-operative strategies to gain men's support (Bauer, 2012).

The Rwandan law on GBV was successful in its acceptance by parliament partly because the driving group included both male and female MPs in the process from the outset (Devlin & Elgie, 2008). Men were included at every stage of the policy-making process, both in public consultations and in drafting the bill (Pearson, 2008). The group could have chosen the women's caucus to present the bill to parliament, which would have been logical, but chose instead to have it presented by four men and four women. This helped the GBV bill to be seen as a community issue rather than a women's issue, to avoid alienating male MPs, and to secure male support for the bill (Pearson, 2008). This also represented a genuine attempt to include men's issues and men's concerns within the GBV bill. Using careful language also helped engage and not alienate men.

The Ugandan women's caucus allows men to join as affiliated members; an increasing number are joining voluntarily, which demonstrates UWOPA's growing momentum (Wang, 2012). Ugandan women parliamentarians have been targeting progressive and responsive men for some time, moving from a confrontational approach to a collaborative one (Wang, 2012). Co-opted men have voted in favour of gender equality bills, and sometimes tabled private member bills on gender issues (Wang, 2012). It has been invaluable to have male support in parliament. The domestic violence advocacy and lobbying was aimed specifically at men, in terms which might affect male MPs, and framed as an issue which affects everyone, not just women (Wang, 2012).

# 4. Lessons on responsiveness

This section reviews a few lessons from the literature on what makes female MPs more responsive to a women's constituency.

## Barriers to participation

Women experience many and varied barriers to their participation in formal political life. In Burundi, at the local council level, women have a high illiteracy rate; lack of time; precarious livelihoods; and are not paid for being a councillor (Sow, 2012). Women also appear not to have freedom of choice over which political

party they belong to and vote for; this decision is usually made by the husband. In Rwanda, women were discouraged from running for office at the senior level of executive secretary due to the long working hours and motorbike travel (Sow, 2012). At the very lowest level in Rwanda, villages and cells, female representatives are more numerous than male, yet they speak less often and take a smaller part in discussion due to social conventions around women's public voice (Sow, 2012).

## Civil society partnerships

It is a clear and consistent finding in the literature that working with women's organisations and activists is a central strategy for women's effectiveness and legitimacy in parliaments (Bauer, 2012; Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2013). This is seen as establishing **broad coalitions of support** (Wang, 2012). Domingo et al., (2012) suggest that a transformative shift in gender relations is likely to come from civil society organisations (CSOs) and working beyond the formal political sphere. 'Women in politics' has been somewhat successful, but building a strong collaborative women's movement is more likely to bring real change (expert comments).

In Burundi (Sow, 2012), women parliamentarians have been most effective for women's rights when they have been able to link up with CSOs. CSOs helped in redrafting the penal code to give a clearer definition of rape and gender-based violence, and their amendments were supported by female parliamentarians. Some of these amendments remain in the new code.

In South Africa, alliances with activists and others outside parliament were crucial in passing the domestic violence bill in 1998 (Devlin & Elgie, 2008). Vetten et al. (2012) attribute the success of this bill to the vibrancy of the recent civil and women's rights struggles and parliamentarians' close connections to activism. In the KwaZulu-Natal provincial parliament, 40 per cent of the women interviewed said they were placed on the parliamentary list due to their work as gender activists, and that they intended to continue this work in parliament (Francis, 2009). Women in this parliament reported good connections with NGOs, and said that information and action flows both ways (Francis, 2009).

The Rwandan GBV bill had considerable buy-in from communities and CSOs. Many female MPs were previously civil society activists and retain **strong connections and networks, and a sense of responsibility** to represent these views (Pearson, 2008). There are several close relationships between female MPs and women's rights CSOs. The women's caucus also has a formal relationship with CSOs, where it advises and explains parliamentary processes. Some female MPs report having contact with CSOs at least once a week. This example shows that a two-way relationship between MPs and CSOs can have positive effects both for democracy and women's rights. The extensive consultation processes gave the draft bill public legitimacy and support, which both helped the MPs be representative, and also gave it the public support which meant the bill was hard to reject (Pearson, 2008).

Ugandan women's movement activists played a central role in working with government to enact gender equality legislation (Wang, 2012). UWOPA has enabled CSOs to **access parliamentarians**, and UWOPA relies on CSOs to provide **expert research and assistance** on drafting bills (Wang, 2012). The relationship is symbiotic in advancing women's rights.

One of the lessons emerging from Rwanda is that female government employees do not have adequate training in gender equality, and that they can benefit from collaborating with CSOs, which are able to provide expertise and analysis which can be relayed into political processes (Sow, 2012). CSOs can play a strong role in strengthening capacities and mainstreaming gender.

Sudan provides an illustrative example of how **poor links between activists and legislators can stymie progress** on women's issues (Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2013). The literature identifies several factors which prevent coalitions forming: patronage politics; patriarchal norms; social authoritarianism; and parliamentarians' professionalisation when in office (Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2013). Tønnessen and al-Nagar (2013) go on to identify a rift between activists pushing for gender equality, and legislators calling for gender equity. The government has demonised activists' stance as a Westernised and foreign import which is un-Islamic. Activists therefore refuse to cooperate with the government for fear of legitimising this position, making dialogue difficult between the two groups of women's rights proponents. This has weakened the possibility of a strong women's movement.

At the time of the 2011 referendum, Sudanese women felt that their female political representatives were **elite and divorced from the grassroots** (Domingo et al., 2012). This is partly because of lack of resources to travel and meet with constituencies. In Rwanda (Sow, 2012), respondents considered elected representatives as cut off from communities for the same reason.

## Political systems

As noted above, women may feel more tied to party, ethnic or regional allegiances than a gender equality agenda. UN Women warns that that working to support women in formal structures or within political parties does not address underlying patriarchal hierarchies or the internal logic of parties (Domingo et al., 2012).

The type of electoral system may affect where women's loyalties lie. The South African proportional representation system appears to increase numbers of women in parliament but reduces their accountability to constituents, as it is the **party which fosters loyalty rather than voters** (Vetten et al., 2012; Francis, 2009). In Tanzania, some reserved seat female MPs are working to build support in constituencies so they can later run for elected office there (Yoon, 2011). They are creating pockets of support through constituency work and are developing a strong relationship with voters.

In many African countries discussed in the literature, government structures are weak and a single party or leader holds **authoritarian power**. This makes it difficult for any MP or group to challenge regressive policies unless they have the support of the dominant group (Yoon, 2011). In Uganda, Museveni personally intervened to remove clauses in the Land Act relating to women's ownership of land, making it impossible for lobbyists to advocate for women's land rights (Muriaas & Wang, 2012). South African parliamentarians and lobbyists were unsuccessful in producing an effective sexual offences bill; the final bill is weak, duplicates other laws, and did not use public consultations (Vetten et al., 2012). Although women pressed for various changes with the help of civil campaigns, parliament was unresponsive to their demands (Vetten et al., 2012). This demonstrates that in many cases, activism, a caucus and a strong common position is simply not enough to overcome an authoritarian system.

## Donor roles

The literature does not specifically draw out lessons for donors, but there are some examples of how donors have engaged with issues of women's representation. In Uganda, donors have financed the women's caucus directly, and provided training to MPs on advocacy, networking and outreach (Wang, 2012). Some have provided consultants to help draft bills (Wang, 2012). In Sudan, many new women's NGOs were established with donor funding after the CPA was signed in 2005 (Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2013). UNDP provided capacity-building for women in political parties, in preparation for the new 25 per cent

women's quota in 2005 (Tønnessen & al-Nagar, 2013). UNDP and UN Women have also provided capacity training to female politicians in Burundi, Nigeria, and South Sudan on the assumption that this will enhance the quality of women's political participation (Domingo et al., 2012). Providing resources and capacity training to women's organisations and movements has also been successful in helping them advocate to their parliamentary representatives (Domingo et al., 2012).

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## Key websites

- Women's Studies International Forum Special Issue – Democratization and gender quotas in Africa: http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/02775395/41/part/P2

- Gender Links – Women in Politics Making a Difference: http://www.genderlinks.org.za/page/women-in-politics

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