

# Introduction

*There are proportionately fewer women in the world's parliaments than there were ten years ago. To have begun to redress the imbalance but then allow it to slip away is unforgivable.*

'BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN PARLIAMENT,' REPORT OF A TASK FORCE OF THE COMMONWEALTH WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS GROUP.

At a time when the world seems to be moving towards more democratic forms of government, and when the issue of gender equality is receiving more attention than ever before, the participation of women in national-level politics, measured in percentage terms, is actually in decline. Inter-Parliamentary Union figures suggest that female membership of National Parliaments fell from 12.1 per cent of total membership in 1985 to 11 per cent in 1995.

While the decrease may be linked with the dwindling numbers of women in the Parliaments of Eastern Europe, the overall situation seems to be one of stagnation. At the global level, women on average occupy only 6.2 per cent of ministerial-level posts, usually those in the broad area of social affairs. In 62 countries, no women Ministers are to be found at all. And when it comes to the top levels of national leadership, women seem to disappear from the scene almost completely: in late 1994, for example, a grand total of ten governments worldwide were headed by women.

Within this less than inspiring picture, how does the Commonwealth perform? One Commonwealth member, the Seychelles, relatively small in size, at one stage held the world record for women's representation in a national political assembly: under its former one-party government, 48 per cent of parliamentary seats were held by women. That figure fell to 27.3 per cent following multi-party elections in 1993. Even so, the tiny archipelago state was top of the Commonwealth league as far as the participation of women in politics is concerned. However, following the National Assembly Election of March 1998, the figure had slipped down to 23.5 per cent for Seychelles with S. Africa leading with 27.8 per cent of women in the National Assembly.

Figures for 1995 revealed that on average within the Commonwealth's 53 member states women totalled just 7.2 per cent of Parliamentary Members – a proportion well below the global average. In a number of Commonwealth states, women made up less than 4 per cent of national parliaments. And a handful of member states boasted no women parliamentarians at all.

Variations within the Commonwealth are indicated in Figure 1, which sets out the representation of women in the Parliaments and Cabinets of the eleven Commonwealth states selected for this study. As far as parliament is concerned in 1996, the proportion of women members varies from 0 per cent to 25 per cent in post-apartheid, democratic South Africa and

27.3 per cent in the small island state of Seychelles. At cabinet level, the top position is held by Canada, with 26.4 per cent of ministerial posts occupied by women. In short, then, no Commonwealth country has yet attained the 30 per cent mark identified by the United Nations as the threshold of the “critical mass” essential for the empowerment of women in legislative and decision-making terms. And just three Commonwealth states – Bangladesh, Guyana and Sri Lanka – currently have women Heads of Government.

### **Why Gender Parity in Politics is Important?**

In basic democratic terms, a government that is exclusively or predominantly made up of men cannot claim to be a government for the people by the people. As Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women, put it, “the level of participation of women in decision-making and power sharing between men and women ... calls into question the basic principles of democracy.” The point is reinforced by a resolution on women in politics passed by the Council of the Inter-Parliamentary Union in April 1992. This argued that “the concept of democracy will only assume true and dynamic significance when political parties and national legislation are decided upon jointly by men and women with equitable regard for the interests and aptitudes of both halves of the population.”

What seems beyond dispute is that women are best placed to identify and articulate their own needs and concerns. The entry of women into parliament, no matter how slow and painful the process, has seen a significant broadening of the issues under debate. A discussion paper on Women and Parliament in Australia and New Zealand notes that issues such as abortion, domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, single parenthood, women’s health and urban isolation have entered the parliamentary agenda in those two countries over the past two decades. The period has also seen the removal of structural and legal impediments to the advancement of women. New legislation has targeted sex discrimination and promoted equal employment opportunities. “These acts,” the paper argues, “are testimony to significant efforts by women members and are now resulting in increases to workplace flexibility through industrial reform – the introduction of job flexibility, flexitime, career break schemes, workplace child care, parental leave and so on.”

Nations that exclude women from decision-making, or rest content with low levels of participation by women, are surely depriving themselves of a rich reservoir of talent, experience and wisdom. They are also missing out on the qualitatively different approach that women seem to bring to the decision-making process. Surveys undertaken in the United States indicate that the presence of even a few women in the corridors of power results in a more participatory, less autocratic style and mode of government.

**Figure 1 The Eleven Commonwealth Case Studies: Women in Politics: Problems, Experiences & Strategies for Action**

COUNTRY	YEAR OF ELECTION	WOMEN TOTAL UPPER HOUSE	% WOMEN IN UPPER HOUSE
AUSTRALIA	1996	23/76	30.7
CANADA	1996	24/103 Senate	23.3
BANGLADESH	1996		
DOMINICA	1995		
GUYANA	1996		
INDIA	1994	20/250 Rajya Sabha	8
MALAYSIA	1995	12/69 Dewan Negara	7.8
PAPUA NEW GUINEA	1994		
SEYCHELLES	1993		
SOUTH AFRICA	1994	6/90 Senate	17.8
UGANDA	1996		

### Declarations versus Realities

The under-representation of women in political life, so striking and universal a feature of current reality, coexists with a plethora of declarations and conventions affirming commitment to gender equality in the political arena. The UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), for example, states that “parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in political life and shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right to participate in the formulation and implementation of government policy and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government.”

Echoing these sentiments, the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action calls on governments to take measures to ensure women’s equal access to, and full participation in, power structures and decision-making by creating a “gender balance” in government and administration. It advocates more energetic efforts to integrate women into political parties, increase women’s participation in decision-making and leadership, and enhance the role played by women in the electoral process and in political activities in general.

In the 1990 Harare Declaration, Commonwealth Heads of Government vowed to “defend and achieve the principle of equality for women so that they may exercise their full and equal rights.” Three years later at their biennial gathering in Cyprus they supported the proposal that “special measures as appropriate be taken to increase women’s positions at all levels

<b>WOMEN/TOTAL LOWER HOUSE</b>		<b>% WOMEN LOWER HOUSE</b>	<b>WOMEN/TOTAL IN CABINET</b>	<b>% WOMEN IN CABINET</b>
23/148	House of Reps	15.5	2/17	11.8
52/295	House of Commons	17.6	9/34	26.4
37/336	National Assembly	11	2/26	7.6
3/32	House of Assembly	9.4	2/10	20
12/72	House of Assembly	14.4	2/18	11
41/192	Dewan Rakyat	7.4		
2/25	Dean Rakyat	8		
0/109	National Parliament	0	0	0
9/33	National Assembly	27.3	3/12	25
100/400	National Assembly	25	4/25	16
46/284	National Assembly	16.1	4/53	7.5

of the political and decision-making process at the national level and in Commonwealth organisations.” And in Auckland in 1995, the Heads of Government endorsed the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development, which states that “as a moral and strategic imperative”, member states must work to ensure women’s participation “in decision-making processes and structures including political structures at all levels, local, district, national, regional, and international, through positive and/or affirmative action.”

Despite these admirable affirmations, pledges and commitments, however, women at the close of the twentieth century enjoy what can only be described as a token presence in most governments around the world. Those who have succeeded in breaching the barriers almost invariably prove to be remarkable individuals whose experiences, not to mention tenacity and determination, are not easily replicated. In this study we look at 33 such examples: women from every corner of the Commonwealth – Africa, Asia, Canada, the Caribbean, and the Pacific – who have defied the odds and propelled themselves into national or provincial politics.

Our sample, as can be seen from Figure 2, includes women politicians in a variety of roles: legislators from both upper and lower houses; former as well as serving ministers; a parliamentary Speaker; provincial level leaders; a serving vice-president; a former prime minister. In each case, we follow the subject through her early life and political initiation before tracking her progress to political heights. In the process, we seek to identify factors that provided critical support and specific strategies of action

Figure 2 The Eleven Commonwealth Case Studies: *Women in Politics*

COUNTRY	EX PRIME MINISTER	EX DEP. PM	VICE- PRESIDENT	SPEAKER	EX STATE PREMIER
AUSTRALIA					
BANGLADESH					
CANADA					
DOMINICA	1				
GUYANA		1			
INDIA					
MALAYSIA					
PAPUA NEW GUINEA					1
SEYCHELLES					
SOUTH AFRICA				1	
UGANDA			1		

that helped the subject overcome barriers and blaze new trails.

A key assumption of this study is that there lies within the experience, and sheer grit, of these remarkable contemporary women, lessons of wider application. As Shakespeare noted for all time, some are born great while others have greatness thrust upon them. But for most of us the challenge lies in the third option he identified: that of overcoming, or pushing beyond, mundane reality to achieve greatness.

INTRODUCTION

MINISTER	STATE MIN.	EX-MIN.	MP (R)	MP (O)	EX MP	SENATOR (R)	SENATOR (O)	OTHER
				1			1	1
1		1	1					
2						1		
1					1			
1			1					
				2		1		
1	2							
		1			1			
2				1				
1				1				
1					1			

Given the deep-seated historical and cultural factors weighing against them, most of the women politicians portrayed in this study would seem to fall within this third category of heroic achievers. Therein lies, we hope, the value of this study. For if greatness can be achieved, it can be both learned and facilitated. The women who make up this book can perhaps begin to tell us how.