



Human Rights Advocates

P.O. Box 5675, Berkeley, CA 94705 USA

**A New Political Landscape: Achieving the MDGs by Increasing the Political Participation
of Women**

Contact Information:

**Areej Alharbi, Edith Coliver Intern
Representing Human Rights Advocates through
University of San Francisco School of Law's
International Human Rights Law Clinic**

Tel: 415-422-6961

Arj-1988@hotmail.com

Professor Connie de la Vega

delavega@usfca.edu

I. Introduction:

Women have struggled with the issue of politics for centuries now. For example, in the United States women faced resistance with the voting laws within the parameters of women's suffrage until the late 19th century, and even then limitations were placed on them. Globally, the problem can be much worse but also positive with some countries displaying the highest female percentages in their parliament, as a way of participating politically. The most compelling argument within this struggle is how society and its views can empower female participation in the political arena.

There are many concerns as to why women are still not contributing in the capacity they should be in regards to political participation. Even though most of the countries in the world are parties to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the data that has been gathered shows that discrimination still exists. As of June 2013, only eight women served Head of State and thirteen served as Head of Government. Globally, there are 37 states in which women account for less than 10 percent of parliamentarians in single or lower houses as of July 2013.¹ This clearly shows that women still have a very long way to go before they are seen as equals in the political playing field in comparison to their male counterparts even with countries such as Rwanda, Sweden and Tunisia laying the groundwork for women to take a more active role.

The final goal of this report is to suggest ways to improve female political participation as the third goal of the MDGs, which is promote gender equality and

¹ Facts and Figures: Leadership and Political Participation. United Nation Women. Available at: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures#notes>

empower women, as well as the proportion of seats held by women in national parliament. This report will first discuss the use of quotas to achieve adequate political participation of women and how some countries have used quotas. The report then will discuss other national and UN programs aimed at increasing the political participation of women. It concludes that quota systems are only one method for achieving political participation of women; they have to be done in conjunction with national and UN programs, and pressure from women's groups to effectively support the political participation of women.

II. The Use of Quotas to Achieve Equal Participation:

The core idea behind quota systems is to recruit women into political positions and to make sure that women are not only seen as token places in politics but have a very real and active role.² Yes, women are needed to fulfill certain "quotas" that call for gender equality, but they also have the ability and strength to be on the level of most men that are also in politics. There are many pros and cons that have been brought up on this topic with a few of the pros being that quotas for women do not discriminate, but compensate for actual barriers that prevent women from their fair share of the political seats.³ Another important one is that women's experiences are needed in political life.⁴ Some of the cons on the other hand are that many women do not want to get elected just because they are women and that quotas go against the principal of equal opportunity for

² Dahlerup, Drude. Using Quota's to Increase Women's Political Representation (2002). Originally published in International IDEA's Handbook: Women in Parliament Beyond Numbers, Stockholm, International IDEA, 1998), 1-7, available at http://www.idea.int/publications/wip/upload/3_Dahlerup.pdf.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

all, since women are given preference. Anna Balletbo, an MP in Spain, sees quotas as having a mixture of both pros and cons by saying,

“Quota’s are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they oblige men to think about including women in decision-making, since men must create spaces for women. On the other hand, since it is men who are opening up these spaces, they will seek out women who they will be able to manage – women who will more easily accept the hegemony of men.”⁵

This is a fair assessment and makes one think that quite possibly the quota system is not enough in the hope of raising women’s representation. As will be discussed, all these strategies need to be pursued in order to achieve greater political participation of women.

III. Positive examples of political participation of women:

Rwanda has the highest number of women parliamentarians worldwide.⁶ Women there have won 63.8 percent of seats in the lower house which is quite an accomplishment in an area that has seen so much political strife and even genocide just two decades ago in 1994.⁷ The dramatic gains for women are a result of specific mechanisms used to increase women’s political participation, among them a constitutional guarantee, a quota system, and innovative electoral structures.⁸ These three components make politics more accessible to women due to the fact that after this devastating act of genocide occurred and the Tutsi’s won military victory, the new regime established under the name of Rwandan Patriotic Front or RPF. During the period

⁵ Dahlerup, Drude, *supra* note 2 at 2.

⁶ Powley, Elizabeth. (2005). Case Study - Rwanda: Women Hold up Half the Parliament. In *title of Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers (Section 2. Overcoming Obstacles)*. Retrieved from <http://www.idea.int/publications/wip2/upload/Rwanda.pdf>

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

afterward many changes took place that proved beneficial to women that included the construction of a new gender-sensitive constitution. It was the first post-genocide parliament that happened in October 2003 where women's role in government skyrocketed with a nearly 50 percent representation in office.⁹

An example of how women participation as leaderships makes a difference is the act towards abortion that took place in 2012, in Rwanda. Despite the fact that Rwanda has signed the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), Rwanda made reservation to article 14.2 (c) leaving abortions illegal in all situations.¹⁰ The article 14.2 (c) authorizes abortions "in cases of sexual assault, rape, incest, and where the continued pregnancy endangers the mental and physical health of the mother or the life of the mother or the foetus." Abortion is a cultural, sensitive issue in Rwanda; this is why the reservation was taken in the first place; also this is why this crucial problem has not had any serious action taken by the government even though the public has taken action.

Public awareness was raised when Doctor Paulin Basinga, with the assistance of other colleagues, published a study entitled "Abortion Incidence and Postabortion Care in Rwanda." One of the findings was that 40% of the abortions had health issues that required medical help; however, only two thirds of that 40% had the chance to receive medical treatment.¹¹ Along with that, the cabinet of Rwanda approved a draft Presidential Order to lift the reservation on the Maputo Protocol, while will be discussed in the

⁹ Powley, Elizabeth, *supra* note 6.

¹⁰ Rwanda: Abortion might be legalized in certain cases, but crucial report secret (2012). Rwanda Focus. Available on <http://www.afrika.no/Detailled/21330.html>

¹¹ *Id.*

parliament.¹² The previous two acts are what countries need to do. First, educate women about their rights by raising the issue or the problem, and take legislative action on that issue. If women participation in politics is not as high as it is in Rwanda it will be hard to take any governmental actions.

Sweden is another country that has proven to be favorable to women in politics. It has the second highest percentage of female parliamentarians in the national parliament in Europe with 44%.¹³ It also benefits immensely from a quota system as well as the civil society organizations that are very supportive. These are the two factors that have helped most in improving female participation in the political arena and that other countries could use as a model when trying to include women in their own political arena.

Although these factors have played a considerable part to assist women in politics the Swedish quota system is still not regulated in constitutional laws.¹⁴ The quotas are decided by the political parties and are normally set in the parties' own regulations. Civil society plays a key role in fostering stability, security and respect for democracy and human rights. Therefore, ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) which is part of OSCE (Organization for security and Co-operation in Europe) co-operate with civil society organizations, which helps in sharing the knowledge on women's rights and train women to have the skills leadership and practicing.¹⁵ Again, with these outstanding programs that Sweden has been able to put into place they have been instrumental in creating places where women can shine in the political arena and be

¹² Supra note 10.

¹³ Sweden: women's representation in Parliament. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), available at http://www.idea.int/news/upload/sweden_women.pdf

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

treated as equals among their male peers. Tunisia is also a country that has seen a lot of political turmoil in its time like Rwanda. There was a Revolution that occurred here as well, and like in the case of Rwanda, it may have had something to do with a shift in the way that gender roles are perceived. Women were normally seen as the homemakers who would take care of the children, cook the meals and clean the house.¹⁶ The role of financial provider was then left to the male of the household as well as the majority of the decision-making. It is difficult to reconcile a need for gender equality that supports women's rights and the traditionalist values that some women still hold so dear. With the fact remaining that Tunisia holds a 26% rate of women that are part of the National Parliament, which they have achieved in part with the quota system, female legislatures have not been able to take any real legislative actions.¹⁷ Even though this number might not be that impressive, this is the second highest percentage in the Middle Eastern countries. According to a study that was organized by the NDI (National Democratic Institution), which took place after the revolution, many political parties sought out women to fulfill the gender quotas. However, according to participants the real participation was missing because most of the female participants haven't heard from the parties after the election, with few exceptions where women members hold some real responsibilities.¹⁸ The reason behind the insufficient participation is the fact that civil society input in empowering woman is not that strong. A fact that would lead us to the final goal of this paper, which is how important civil society organizations are in improving the female participation in the political arena with the quota system being a

¹⁶ Borovsky, Gabriella and Yahia, Asma Ben. Women's Political Participation in Tunisia After the Revolution (2012). Available on <http://www.ndi.org/files/womens-political-participation-Tunisia-FG-2012-ENG.pdf>

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

critical part of this positive change. While Tunisia has come a long way in terms of making equality a reality for women in a lot of respects, it still has some work to do when it comes to the quota system. It is a primary example of how this system is working against women rather than for the betterment of their political success. Drude Dahlerup, author of the chapter entitled ‘Using Quotas to Increase Women’s Political Representation’ found in the International IDEA’s Handbook said “The implementation of a quota system is made easier in a new political system than in an older one, where most seats might be “occupied.””¹⁹ In fact, it has been proven that countries that make this quota system part of their constitutional law or national legislation make it easier for women to gain access to political reign. This group includes eleven Latin American countries that all require a minimum of 20 to 40 percent women candidates in national elections.²⁰

Other countries such as Nepal, India, Belgium, Italy and France all enforce this quota system as well. The one exception to this rule is found in the “Nordic Case.” This group is made up of the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Norway and Sweden that currently have the highest political representation of women in the world.²¹ They are able to achieve this lofty goal primarily through continuous pressure that stems from women’s groups as well as a very affluent women’s movement. This method has proven to be very effective for these countries but other things such as assistance with education and reconstructing social reform through programs that support women might be helpful

¹⁹ Dahlerup, Drude, *supra* note 2 at 4.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.* at 3.

and very tangible solutions as well. These methods will be discussed in the next section.

IV. Programs to promote women participation:

This part will discuss both national and UN programs aimed to increase political participation of women.

A. National programs:

Education is a strong answer to much inefficiency in government such as policy reform and awareness of individual rights. In fact, if countries throughout the world can take the time to implement programs that are able to educate women about their rights and train them to participate politically as leaders they would have a much better chance of succeeding as not only strong community members but also people of stature in government and social circles.

Education would in fact become the impetus for helping women to find their own voice and thrive in a world that might otherwise be dominated by men. Breaking through these strong traditional barriers may be a good place to start. If women could understand that they do have a place in both the home and in the world outside of the home they might gain the confidence to become something more than a wife and a mother if they so choose. Women could access classes on business leadership through local schools and colleges in their area. They could attend lectures organized by particular women's groups that are made up of a variety of individuals who have careers as doctors, lawyers, social advocates and politicians to name a few. These women could also provide mentorship to the new women who are coming in and serve as role models to them. If these professional women are wives and mothers it is all the better because it could show

the new members that women are not strictly one-dimensional and can have a fully balanced life that does include both family and career simultaneously.

These groups could be funded by the government, privately funded, or funds received through some type of donation or membership process. Within the general infrastructure of this educational process would be a primary goal to implement programs that could help women to receive the leadership skills that they need to participate in the political arena. Bridget Dahl, Speaker of Parliament in Sweden reinforces this statement by saying,

“One cannot deal with the problem of female representation by a quota system alone. Political parties, the educational system, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trade unions, churches all must take responsibility within their own organizations to systematically promote women’s participation, from the bottom up. This will take time. It will not happen overnight, or in one year or five years; it will take one to two generations to realize significant change. This is what we are working towards in Sweden. We did not start with a quota system. First we laid the groundwork to facilitate women’s entry into politics. We prepared the women to ensure they were competent to enter the field; and we prepared the system, which made it a little less shameful for men to step aside. Then we used quotas as an instrument in segments and institutions where we needed a breakthrough.”²²

The area where she discusses laying groundwork as well as preparing women to enter the field surely includes a strong educational platform that is supported and well received by women as well as the support of other important advocacy groups such as the United Nations.

B. UN Programs:

The United Nations, or UN for short, has always had a strong presence on the international platform of ensuring that both civil rights and human justice laws are being strictly enforced and utilized. In July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly

²² Supra note 3 at 2.

created an organization called UN Women. This is the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. It builds on the critical work that the UN system has already done and according to its website, unwomen.org, some of its main roles are to “support intergovernmental bodies, such as the Commission on the Status of Women, in their formulation of policies, global standards and norms”²³ and “To hold the UN system accountable for its own commitments on gender equality, including regular monitoring of system-wide progress.”²⁴

With this said, the United Nation can definitely assist in the empowerment of the political participation of women by becoming involved in a partnership with another international body much like itself. In this case they decided to pair with the group known as the United Nation Development Program that is also referred to as the UNDP. An important example of this was shown when UN Women in partnership with the UNDP helped women to establish a subsidiary group called Women’s Network of Mayors and Local Councilors as part of the Congress of Local Authorities from Moldova.²⁵ This was an exceptional way to raise awareness of women in politics that also lead to a strong boost in the percentage of women district councilors and mayors in that area.

Another primary goal of UN Women is not only the empowerment of women which is obviously critical to their success, but that of the “achievement of equality between women and men as partners and beneficiaries of development, human rights,

²³ About UN Women. UN Women. Available on <http://www.unwomen.org/en/about-us/about-un-women>

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ Parliaments and Local Governance. UN Women. Available on <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/parliaments-and-local-governance>

humanitarian action and peace and security.”²⁶ While many positive benchmarks have been made, the fact still remains that “women lack access to decent work and face occupational segregation and gender wage gaps”²⁷ as well as “being often denied access to basic education and health care.”²⁸

One advancement that is worth noting to overcome the barrier of gender equality can be found in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).²⁹ UN Women offices are found all over the world in Africa, Americas and the Caribbean, Arab States/North Africa, Asia and the Pacific and Europe and Central Asia. They also provide intergovernmental support and training for gender equality and women’s empowerment that includes web based practices and innovative tools, promotes information sharing and inspires discussion on key issues related to training for gender equality.³⁰ There is also a Women Virtual Campus that according to the website is “coming soon” and will offer “an e-learning platform which will widen the outreach of training materials and opportunities at the global level” and is expected to be available by mid-2014.³¹

All in all, these wonderful programs and ideas provide solutions to close the gender employment gap and fall right into play with what was earlier discussed regarding

²⁶ About UN Women, supra note 23.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ Training for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment. UN Woman. Available on <http://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/capacity-development-and-training#sthash.koqjgmR.dpuf>

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

both education and policy reform being needed in order to compensate for the glaring deficiency that still exists where women's rights are concerned.

V. Conclusion:

In the 21st century women have certainly come to a better place in many aspects from how they were before any existence of international laws. This only proves that international law helps the world to be a better place. Women have more rights than ever before but in certain countries there is still a strong need to build up the momentum that women need to thrive, challenge themselves, and interact with the world in a role of respect and value that many men still hold privilege to. This has already been done in countries such as Sweden, where according to the statistical data women, are held in high regard even without a constitutional law being in place.

Rwanda, which does have a constitutional framework in place when it comes to a quota system,³² has found a new place for women in politics after suffering through a terrible tragedy and going through a difficult post-genocide transitional period. This only reinforces the fact that sometimes a country has to go through a major shift in government and ideologies to ensure that change is effective and swift. Incorporating groups such as UN Women that pursue the topic of gender equality full heartedly also bring a lot to the table when it comes to looking at the direction of women in politics and how as a society we can assist women nationwide in the ultimate goal of achieving rights for ALL women in ALL countries and not just a limited few who might have more resources or don't live under the veil of traditionalist values.

³² Powley, Elizabeth. (2005). Case Study - Rwanda: Women Hold up Half the Parliament. In title of Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers (Section 2. Overcoming Obstacles), retrieved from <http://www.idea.int/publications/wip2/upload/Rwanda.pdf>

As this paper has shown, it will take a lot of perseverance, educational tools and increased awareness on the topic of the third MDG to be a complete success. Various strategies, such as use of quotas and educational programs, must be used in conjunction to achieve success. The fact remains that it can be done and more than that it should be done if we are ever to be seen as a truly compassionate universe where all people are treated with decency and respect as equals.