

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF WOMEN MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT ON PEACE, SECURITY AND DECISION-MAKING

WRITTEN BY **NATHALIE LASSLOP**

GALLO IMAGES / AFP



Liberian President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, gives a speech on 22 February 2007 during the opening ceremony of the Women Parliamentarians International Conference in Kigali, Rwanda.

Is women's political participation only a question of democratic representation and women's rights, or can women also contribute a new dimension to politics? Can politics be engendered by an increase in women politicians? The *Platform for Action*, the document resulting from the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), calls for action by governments, national bodies, the private sector, political parties, trade unions, employers' organisations, research and academic institutions, sub-regional and regional bodies and non-governmental and international organisations to take positive action to build a critical mass of women leaders, executives and managers in strategic decision-making

positions¹. The United Nations (UN) Economic and Social Council sets this "critical mass" at 30% women's participation.

There are several arguments for targeting an equal number of men and women in decision-making positions²:

- **The justice argument** – women account for approximately half the population and therefore have the right to be represented as such.
- **The critical mass argument** – women are able to achieve solidarity of purpose to represent women's interests when they achieve certain levels of representation.

- **The democracy argument** – the equal representation of women and men enhances democratisation of governance in both transitional and consolidated democracies.
- **The experience argument** – women’s experiences are different from men’s and need to be represented in discussions that result in policy-making and implementation. These different experiences imply that women ‘do politics’ differently from men.
- **The interest argument** – the interests of men and women are different and even potentially conflicting and therefore, women are needed in representative institutions to articulate the interests of women.
- **The symbolic argument** – women are attracted to political life when they have role models in the arena.

Advances made since the Fourth World Conference on Women towards Equal Participation in Leadership Positions

The UN report in preparation for the 50th session (27 February – 10 March 2006) of the Commission on the Status of Women “Equal Participation of Women and Men in Decision-Making Processes at all Levels” lays out that the last decade has seen important improvements for women in leadership positions. At the time of the first World Conference on Women held in Mexico in 1975, women accounted for 10.9% of members of parliaments worldwide. In 1995, it was 11.3% and that figure has increased to 15.6% in 2005. Since 1995, more than 30 women have served as heads of governments and/or states and in 2005, 19 women were presiding over houses of parliament. Further, the number of parliaments with 30% representation of women has increased fourfold, while the number of parliaments worldwide in which women representatives constitute less than 10% has decreased significantly from 63% in 1995, to 37% in 2005.

There seems to be reason to celebrate, as the percentage of parliaments that have reached the fourth World Conference’s target of at least 30% women in parliament has increased threefold in the last ten years, to six percent yet “[o]verall, progress, while steady, has been far too slow. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) estimates that if current incremental rates continue, an average of 30% women in parliament would not be reached until 2025 and parity would not be achieved worldwide until 2040”³.

Rwanda is now the world leader in terms of women’s representation in parliament (48.8%), with Mozambique (34.8%) and South Africa (32.8%) also ranked among the top 15 nations and closing in on the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, which

have been traditional leaders in the area of gender equality. In their studies *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers* (2005) and *The Implementation of Quotas: The African Experiences* (2004), the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) has analysed the causes of higher women’s participation, and the conclusions suggest that “this ‘fast-track’ increase is largely due to the adoption of quotas” and that certain electoral systems call for greater women’s participation than others.

IDEA and Stockholm University have conducted an analysis of electoral quota systems, which found that more than 100 countries had implemented previously or were considering implementing quotas. Of the 16 countries that have reached the target 30% critical mass, 14 of them have implemented quotas⁴.

According to the IPU data, encouragingly, a number of post-conflict countries are listed among the top 30 countries averaging between 25% and 30% of women legislators. A lesson retained is that “[t]here appear to be a number of critical junctures, such as peace processes, transitions to democracy and the drafting of new constitutions, that provide opportunities for increasing women’s participation”⁵. African countries are among the eight first countries with the highest women’s participation in a post-conflict parliament. Africa has a wealth of experience in this regard, and there are many lessons to be learned by the rest of the world, that should not be missed.

Initiating Change in the Wake of War: The Gender Composition of Post-Conflict Parliaments

Country	Women	%	Men	%
Rwanda (2003)	39	48.8	41	52.2
Mozambique (2004)	87	34.8	163	65.5
South Africa (2004)	131	32.8	269	67.2
Burundi (2005)	36	30.5	82	69.5
Uganda (2001)	73	23.9	232	76.1

Source: Luciak (2006), *Conflict and a Gendered Parliamentary Response*, p.10, quoting UNRISD (2005), IPU (2005).

Women’s Equal Participation and Gender Mainstreaming

Two challenges to bridging the gender gap must be identified: the increase of women representatives to better meet their demographic percentage in society, and the inclusion of gender-awareness by men and

women into the decision-making process. It is important for *all* involved in decision-making, men and women, to be gender-aware and to use a critical gender analysis framework in their work. Great confusion surrounds terminology around gender issues, and it is important to understand the basic concepts to be able to engage in critical and constructive gender analysis that avoids generalisations and simplification of the issues at hand.

While the term 'sex' identifies the biological differences between women and men, the term 'gender' captures the different roles women and men have within society. It is imperative not to use the two terms and ideas interchangeably, but to be informed and to raise awareness about the complexities the differences bring with them. The danger is to draw essentialist conclusions when analysing the roles either sex tends to be covering in a society. The challenge is to realise that roles are not carried out because a person's sex predetermines them biologically, but because a society in a certain geographical area and timeframe happens to define gender roles in a specific way. Gender roles can therefore be learned and 'unlearned', leaving room for considerable positive change.

While a role does not become a person's 'natural' identity, it does influence men and women's experience

Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Literature Review and Institutional Analysis (2005) sets out women's roles in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction, and outlines women's contributions through their specific experiences as victims of conflict, but also as combatants, peace activists, peace negotiators, survivors, family heads and workers.

During conflict, women and children are the majority of war casualties and victims of sexual and gender-based violence, yet women also assume the key role of ensuring family livelihood in the midst of chaos and destruction and often act as heads of households when the men are absent. Although women in conflict are most often 'only' victimised, their multifaceted role, resulting in a wealth of experience and knowledge, is increasingly recognised.

While gendered conflict patterns, for example men are more likely to be killed or wounded and women are more likely to be victims of sexual violence, must be taken seriously, it is important to avoid the trap of stereotyping. It must also be acknowledged that women can also be fighters and perpetrators⁷ and men, victims of sexual violence⁸. A realistic all-encompassing analysis must be undertaken to ensure reactions to a given challenge are gender sensitive.

WOMEN CAN AND OFTEN WILL BRING DIFFERENT QUALITIES TO THE DECISION-MAKING TABLE

and vision of life. Therefore, women can and often will bring different qualities to the decision-making table, as will any other group in society, although of course, having a woman or women present will not always automatically lead to gender-sensitive analyses.

The Value of Womens' Participation and Gender Mainstreaming for Peace-Building

The binding United Nation Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325 (2000) urges all governments, UN bodies, and parties to armed conflict to make special efforts to protect the human rights of women and girls in conflict-related situations and to ensure a gender perspective in all activities related to peace-building and maintenance. It addresses the protection of women during armed conflict, and calls for an end to impunity for gender-based abuses during and after conflict, the integration of a gender perspective in peace-making and peacekeeping, and the participation of women in all levels of decision-making and issues related to prevention, management and resolution of conflict.

Tsjeard Bouda and Georg Frerks' study *Women's Role in Conflict Prevention, Conflict Resolution and*

Planned atrocities, such as the intentional spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV/AIDS, are integral elements of these new tactics of conflict and primarily target women and girls. Also, when men are away fighting, women are solely responsible for their family's well-being. At the centre, holding the family together, women become the most vulnerable targets, and with their loss, the family and societal fabric disintegrates even further.

Men are not always perpetrators of violence, but are also victims of violence and conflict. Boys for instance, are killed to reduce future soldier capacities in a given country, while sexual violence and rape against men is used in an attempt to 'feminise' men by instilling the perceived lower status of 'women', with the intent of humiliation. "The taboos of patriarchal society contribute to making sexual violence against men invisible. In particular male rape is commonly not reported"⁹.

Human rights abuses such as sexual and gender-based violence, has traditionally not been acknowledged as serious crimes under international law, but recent developments in International Law include:



Liberian women in a peacebuilding network undertaking a house to house sensitisation campaign ahead of the TRC hearings, in 2006, are an example of the significant role women play in reconciliation processes.

- 1 In the statute of the new International Criminal Court (ICC), definitions of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide outlaw many acts of systematic sexual violence: rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilisation, and other acts of similar gravity; and
- 2 At the Special Court in Sierra Leone, forced marriage can now be prosecuted as a crime against humanity. MPs must work actively towards incorporating the necessary measures in their national legislation and budgets.

Substantial experience and expertise have been generated with regard to dealing with the fight against the impunity of sexual and gender-based crimes (for example the International Criminal Tribunal of Rwanda (ICTR) and the Gacaca, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa, the Special Court for Sierra Leone and the Sierra Leone TRC. Not only have milestone judgements now been issued, for example, by the International Tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia (ICTR and ICTY, respectively) in this regard, but they can also be traced back to women's participation as investigators, researchers, judges, legal advisors, and prosecutors.

"[T]he only woman judge on the ICTR, was instrumental in questioning witnesses in the Akayesu case^[10] and evoking testimony of gross sexual violence... [eventually leading] to the defendant's conviction for genocide due to those acts, the first time an international tribunal has found that rape and sexual violence can constitute genocide. Indeed, Judge Navi Pillay, the only woman judge on the ICTR at the time, was instrumental in questioning witnesses in the Akayesu case and evoking testimony of gross sexual violence, resulting in additional charges being added to the indictment. Judge Pillay observed recently: 'Who interprets the law is at least as important as who makes the law, if not more so.... I cannot stress how critical I consider it to be that women are represented and a gender perspective integrated at all levels of the investigation, prosecution, defence, witness protection and judiciary.'¹¹"

Men, presently still filling the vast majority of decision-making positions, tend to mainly consider their own societal experiences as the norm and might forget to include women's experiences when making political decisions. Due to a different set of specific experiences,

there is therefore a greater chance that women will include issues, ask questions and address topics in political life that men might simply forget or ignore because it is outside of their realm of experience.

- After the genocide, in Rwanda, the government needed to deal with a staggering number of landless female households caused by discriminatory **property and inheritance laws**. Women Members of Parliament (MPs) lobbied for the establishment of a Gender Desk in parliament, to support the fight for women's right to inherit property and for widows' rights to claim property from their deceased husband's male relatives.

Post conflict challenges for MPs include:

- With regard to **Demobilisation, Disarmament and Reconstruction (DDR)** efforts, when women are part of irregular armies, it makes it difficult to prove active participation, or when women are not combatants and do not carry weapons required to be handed in to receive DDR assistance, they will not receive such assistance. Special consideration must also be given because "female ex-combatants face a number of additional issues such as health, raising children from rape, ostracism, and domestic violence". MPs' task is to ensure that the needs of all women who joined

armies during conflict, whether they too had an active combatant role or not, are met in reconstruction efforts¹².

- Women are estimated to represent 80% of **internally displaced persons and refugees**, and women ex-combatants and refugees face particular gender-based challenges (counter-traditional gender roles during war are seen as a threat to traditional gender-relations; stigmatisation of victims of sexual violence).
- Measures to combat **domestic violence after conflict** are often overlooked.
- In order to facilitate societal healing, MPs must address violence-related issues and take necessary steps to prevent its downward spiral. Returning combatants for instance, need to learn how to resolve conflict peacefully to prevent an increase in domestic violence.

MPs must actively work towards incorporating the necessary measures in their national legislation and budgets.

When looking at women's roles in conflict, while many are victims, conflict also opens up opportunities for them that should not be lost in the peace-building process. Many women for instance, engage in important work that can lead to political and parliamentary involvement in the post-conflict reconstruction phase

ANTHONY NJUGUNA / REUTERS / THE BIGGER PICTURE



Kenyan women MPs and supporters demonstrating in Nairobi against the country's decision not to guarantee a quota of Kenyan women representatives for the East African Parliament, in 2001.

as activists. The danger is that the return of peace also means the return to prevalent social structures. Many women might then withdraw from political and public life, which can lead to a temporary dip in female participation. This dip can be reversed by international donor pressure and support, as international community involvement in conflict prevention and management can increasingly advocate equal participation by women and men from an early stage in negotiation through to post-conflict reconstruction. Special efforts must be made to maintain and develop the leadership and peace-building skills that women have built, and to direct them into political and parliamentary accomplishments.

The reconstruction of society after conflict has been identified as a pivotal moment for the advancement of gender issues, as old patterns can be changed. Africa, through its considerable achievements has many lessons to offer to the rest of the world when it comes to increasing women's participation in conflict and post-conflict societies and in introducing gender issues in conflict management and peace-building.

Tools for Members of Parliaments

Besides Resolution 1325, a main tool MPs can use for the advancement of women's rights is the *African Women's Protocol*, adopted by African Heads of State in 2003, at the Maputo Summit of the African Union. The protocol entered into force on 25 November 2005 with its 15th ratification¹³. The Protocol is groundbreaking in several ways, as it supports women confronting problems that were not addressed in either the 1979 Convention on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), or the African Charter of Human Rights:

- It calls for equal representation in decision-making and political life reinforcing CEDAW and improving on the 30% target for women's representation that was set by the Beijing process.
- For the first time in international law, it explicitly sets forth the reproductive right of women to medical abortion when pregnancy results from rape or incest or when the continuation of pregnancy endangers the health or life of the mother.
- In another first, the Protocol explicitly calls for the legal prohibition of female genital mutilation, and prohibits the abuse of women in advertising and pornography.
- The Protocol also sets forth a broad range of economic and social welfare rights for women. The rights of particularly vulnerable groups of women, including widows, elderly women, disabled women and "women in distress," which includes poor women, women from marginalised populations groups, and pregnant or nursing women in detention, are specifically recognised.

In 'The African Women, Protocol: A New Dimension for Women's Rights in Africa', in *Gender, Development and Advocacy*, Oxfam (2006), Rose Gawayia and Rosemary Semafumu Mukasa have analysed the ratification process of the Protocol and concluded that:

"on the whole, the level of public awareness about the African Women's Protocol is woefully low. Unfortunately it is lowest among people working with the media, and community organisations. These are the two groups who are crucial for its implementation".

MPs have the power to change this trend by using and raising awareness of the document and pushing for its implementation.

For the long-term, increasing and securing women's participation and gender mainstreaming in parliament and tailored capacity building for women and men must remain a major focus. Women's and gender caucuses at national and regional levels need targeted support to achieve greater impact.

While it is clear that women leaders are playing an increasingly useful role in the area of peace-building, it is also not sufficiently documented and given recognition. This points to a gap, where research and ongoing monitoring of women's leadership achievements is urgently needed. This article will hopefully act as a catalyst for such research. 📌

Nathalie Lasslop is a Project and Research Officer, specialising in gender issues, at AWEPA. This article is taken from a larger research project on the role of parliament in conflict prevention and peace-building in Africa, funded by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Endnotes

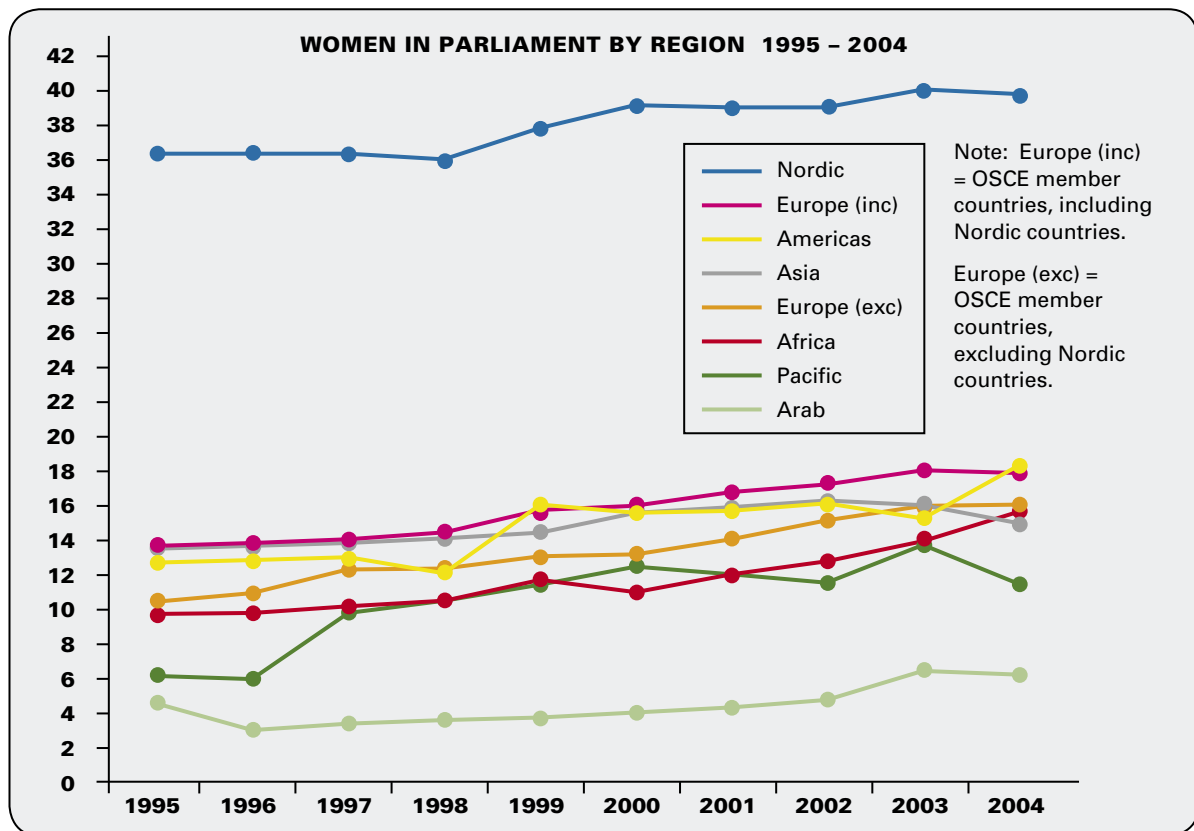
- 1 UNDAW (1995), *Platform for Action*, 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing <<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/index.html>>.
- 2 UNDAW (2005), *Equal Participation of Women and Men in Decision-Making Processes, with Particular Emphasis on Political Participation and Leadership*, Report of the Expert Group Meeting, Addis-Ababa, Ethiopia, 24–27 October 2005; EGM/EPDM /2005/REPORT; <<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/eql-men/FinalReport.pdf>>.
- 3 For more information please see the IPU study *Women In Politics: 60 Years In Retrospect (Information Kit)*, 2006. <http://www.ipu.org/PDF/publications/wmninfokit06_en.pdf>
- 4 IDEA and Stockholm University, *Global Database of Quotas for Women: A Joint Project* <www.quotaproject.org>.
- 5 UNDAW (2005) *Equal Participation of Women and Men in Decision-Making Processes, with Particular Emphasis on Political Participation and Leadership*, Report of the Expert

Group Meeting, Addis-Ababa, Ethiopia, p.22. <<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/eql-men/FinalReport.pdf>>.

- 6 Essentialist positions on gender, race, or other group characteristics, consider these to be fixed traits, while not allowing for variations among individuals or over time. Contemporary proponents of identity politics including feminism, gay rights, and anti-racist activists generally take constructionist viewpoints, agreeing with Simone de Beauvoir that "one is not born, but becomes a woman" <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Essentialism>>.
- 7 In a study collecting girls' involvement in fighting forces during 1990-2003, it was found that: "...girls were part of fighting forces in 55 countries and were involved in armed conflict in 38 of the 55 countries, all of them internal conflicts....Although female participation varies in armies, guerrilla forces, or armed liberation movements, generally they are between one-tenth and one-third of combatants" (See Bouta 2005, p.11). In Rwanda, "for example, an estimated 3 000 women (a total of 100 000 to 125 000 Rwandans were awaiting trial prior to January 2003) have been tried or are awaiting trial as perpetrators in the 1994 Rwandan genocide" (See Luciak 2006, pp.19-20).
- 8 The first trial held by the ICTY was brought against Dusko Tadic and resulted in a number of significant decisions for the future of gender-based crimes under international law. Tadic was convicted on charges of sex crimes involving violent and horrific sexual assaults and mutilation. The charges, were brought for the assaults inflicted upon men, not women. (See Campanaro, Jocelyn (2001) *Women, War and International law: The Historical Treatment of Gender-based War Crimes*, Georgetown Law Journal.)

<http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3805/is_200108/ai_n8972398/pg_11>.

- 9 Luciak, Ilja (2006) *Conflict and a Gendered Parliamentary Response*, UNDP, p.20. <<http://www.parlcrp.undp.org/docs/conference/Luciak.pdf>>.
- 10 On October 2, 1998, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda sentenced former mayor, Jean-Paul Akayesu, to three life sentences for genocide and crimes against humanity and to 80 years for other violations including rape and encouraging widespread sexual violence.
- 11 Barbara Bedont and Katherine Hall Martinez (1999), 'Ending Impunity for Gender Crimes under the International Criminal Court' in *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*. <http://www.crlp.org/pub_art_icc.html>.
- 12 In Bouta, Tsjeard and Ian Bannon (2005) *Gender, Conflict and Development*, The World Bank, p.17, the following definition of 'female combatants' is proposed to security and rehabilitation agencies to ensure that all female combatants are targeted with adequate assistance: "women who are part of an (ir)regular army in any capacity, including, but not limited to, cooks, porters, messengers, and the like, and including women recruited for forced sexual purposes and/or forced marriage" (Bouta 2004; 23). <http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2004/11/15/000090341_20041115142901/Rendered/PDF/30494.pdf>.
- 13 The countries that have ratified the Protocol as of 5 January 2006 are Benin, Cape Verde, The Comoros, Djibouti, The Gambia, Lesotho, Libya, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa and Togo.



Source: IPU, 2005. *Women in Politics: 1945-2005*. Information kit. <<http://www.ipu.org/english/surveys.htm#45-05>>.

Women in Parliament 1945 – 2005

	1945	1955	1965	1975	1985	1995	2000	2005
Number of parliaments	26	61	94	115	136	176	177	187
% of women representatives (lower house or unicameral)	3	7.5	8.1	10.9	12	11.6	13.4	16.2
% of women representatives (upper house)	2.2	7.7	9.3	10.5	12.7	9.4	10.7	14.8

Source: IPU, 2005. *Women in Politics: 1945-2005*. Information kit. <<http://www.ipu.org/english/surveys.htm#45-05>>.

Gender Sensitive Policy Options for Peace Accords

- Organising training and information sharing events for politicians already in office or those involved in the peace talks.
- Developing wider processes of political consultation or representation, for example, with women's organisations.
- Increasing the number of female politicians by training women to run for political office, from village to local authorities to the parliamentary level.
- Fostering discussions within the public, the media and political bodies (including political parties) about women's involvement.
- Setting legislative or party quotas to ensure a minimum number of female candidates.
- Establishing indicators to assess the influence of female and male politicians on political outcomes and the political culture and processes.

Source: Bouta, 2005; 50

Gender Relevant Topics for Peace Accords

- Human rights provisions in new constitutions.
- Equal participation in elections.
- It should be assured that women are included in all decision-making levels as requested in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.
- Laws against sexual and gender-based violence.
- Prosecution of sexual and gender-based violence.
- Special measures to establish:
 - gender-sensitive police forces and other key institutions, e.g. rape (survivor assistance);
 - access to land, property, housing and credit.

Source: Bouta 2005; 52

Women in Decision-Making Bodies 1995 and 2005

	1995			2005		
	No. of Women	Total No.	% of Women	No. of Women	Total No.	% of Women
Head of State or Government	12	187	6.4	8	191	4.2
Presiding Officers of Parliament	24	228	10.5	21	254	8.3
Parliamentarians	–	–	11.3	–	–	15.7 (Jan) 16.0 (Sept)
Ministerial Positions	–	–	Data not available	–	–	14.3

Source: IPU, 2005. *Women in Politics: 1945-2005*. Information kit. <<http://www.ipu.org/english/surveys.htm#45-05>>.