

## **Increasing women in politics: What works worldwide?**

### **Why women's representation matters**

Fawcett believes that politicians who make decisions on our behalf should be representative of the population as a whole.

In particular, we campaign for a greater number of women in politics. We believe that a more balanced group of representatives would lead to better decision-making and political priorities that more closely reflect voters' concerns. For instance, since 1997, when there was a large influx of women into Parliament, matters of importance to women, such as childcare and domestic violence, have moved quickly up the political agenda. Women voters also report that they are more interested and active in political campaign seats where women MPs have been elected.

### **Positive action**

The world average proportion of women members of single or lower chamber legislatures is just 16%, with major regional differences. Less than 10% of cabinet members and 20% of lower ranking government ministers are female, and only 39 nation states have ever selected a woman as prime minister or president.

International evidence has shown that the only way to significantly increase the number of women in parliament is to use positive action measures, such as all-women shortlists. This is clear in the UK, too. In 1997, Labour's policy of selecting candidates from all-women shortlists for half of their winnable seats resulted in the number of women in Westminster doubling from 62 to 121. Labour once again used all-women shortlists for retirement seats at the 2005 general election and this continued policy has resulted in the party having a significantly higher proportion of women MPs compared to the other parties.

Fawcett has called on all parties to use positive action to increase the numbers of women MPs.

### **International perspective**

While no national parliament has full equality in the number of seats held by women and men, the UK is particularly under-represented. With women making up just 19.7% of our MPs, the UK ranks 41<sup>st</sup> out of 184 countries around the world in terms of the percentage of women holding office in the lower or single house of the national parliamentary body.

With parity of representation in all elected assemblies the goal of the 50/50 campaign launched by the Women's Environmental and Development Organisation (WEDO) in

2000, the UK would do better to follow the example set by countries that top the international representation list: Rwanda, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark and the Netherlands.

#### *Rwanda*

In countries where special measures have been adopted by governments or like political parties to increase representation, women held at least 30% of seats in April last year. In Rwanda, for example - the country nearest to full equality, where women held 48.8% of the seats after last year's election compared with a world average of 16% – a quota system is used, which ensures that 24 out of 80 seats in the lower house of parliament are reserved for women.

To attain this, Rwandan women lobbied heavily, helped to draft a new constitution and developed voting guidelines that guaranteed seats for women candidates.

Rwanda's success mirrors that of a small but growing number of countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In South Africa and Mozambique, for example, women hold about 30% of the seats in parliament - matching the international target set at the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China, in 1995.

Most of the countries that have achieved significant increases in women's participation have done so through the use of quotas - a form of affirmative action in favour of women, entailing that they must constitute a certain number or percentage of the members of a body, whether it is a candidate list, a parliamentary assembly, a committee, or a government.

In most countries that have not adopted such special measures, women only hold between 5 and 20% of seats.

#### *Scandinavian and Nordic countries*

The Scandinavian countries – Denmark, Norway and Sweden – have a very high representation of women in politics, while the Nordic countries have among the highest political representation of women in the world. In many of the Nordic countries, political parties have explicitly adopted quotas guaranteeing that 40 or 50% of a party's candidate list are women. This has had a dramatic and positive effect on women's representation in these countries.

In Scandinavia, no constitutional clause or law demands a high representation of women. Instead, it is attributed to sustained pressure from women's groups within parties and the women's movement in general to increase the number of women candidates and those with a chance of actually winning. Some parties responded to this pressure by applying a quota system, however most centre and right-wing parties considered such a tactic "un-liberal".

The Scandinavian example shows that equality promotion in society in general can lead to a political arena that allows women, once elected, to operate effectively and promote further increases in the numbers of women MPs.

Another proven way to increase the representation of women is to have bureaucratically-based systems with incorporated rules guaranteeing women's representation.

In Norway, the closed list proportional representation system is used. Women have always had an advantage in proportional representation systems - of the 10 highest-ranking countries in terms of women's representation, all use proportional representation electoral systems. This is because parties presenting lists have an incentive to present socially balanced selected candidates to the voters. Furthermore, party lists support true equality by offering more opportunities for women to be included without simultaneously excluding men.

On the other hand, single-member district majoritarian systems, such as we have in the UK in general elections, have consistently proven to be the worst possible system for women, forcing the electorate to choose between women and men because parties can only nominate one candidate.

The benefits reaped from increasing the political representation of women are widespread. In Scandinavia, for example, increases in the number of women legislators has been found to be associated with positive changes to the political agenda, particularly with regard to sex equality issues, political discourse and in the behaviour of male legislators. Issues of women's concern, which traditionally were low on the political agenda, began to be addressed more suitably by female representatives.

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