

## WOMEN, ELECTORAL REFORM AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE COMMONWEALTH CARIBBEAN: EFFECTING CHANGE THROUGH ELECTORAL REFORM



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### Introduction

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.<sup>42</sup>

We are all familiar with the basic contention that the extension of full economic, political and social citizenship to women would substantially improve the human condition. Certainly at a political level, it is anticipated that the greater inclusion of women in political parties and government would bring to the political agenda their specific interests which it is claimed cannot always be represented by men. Consequently, it is expected that the larger the share of parliament seats that women occupy the greater the representation of specific

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42. See, Commonwealth Secretariat, *Women in Politics: Voices from the Commonwealth* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1999), p. 6.

women's concerns which will translate into policy action. However, the political assumption that women in politics always represent specific women's interests is, however, far from the truth. Certainly in parliamentary democracies like the Commonwealth Caribbean, given the requirement of strong party line, and collective responsibility, it is difficult for women to deviate from the party line and to influence the Cabinet of Ministers given the few women who are part of the inner circle of government. To do so would in fact result in the undermining of the stability of the party and the government. It is this which has led to the very strong view that the increase presence of women in parliament has not been sufficiently translated into changes.

### **Representational politics**

We are also well aware of the obstacles that women confront and I suppose we need little reminder. However it is important for the purposes of my presentation, particularly where it concerns the English speaking Caribbean countries to remind the gathering of the three types of hurdles that women generally must overcome be elected to public office. First, they have to be willing to stand for election. Second, they have to be nominated by their party and third they have to be elected by the voters. Of the three barriers which act as a deterrent to women's participation in representational politics he argues that it is the second, the nomination by a party, which is the most difficult. Studies have revealed that even where women have shown an interest in more active participation in electoral politics, the selection process discriminates against them. Certainly the nomination campaign has proven to be far more demanding for women than for their male counterparts who often have to confront a greater number of competitors.

While several Commonwealth Caribbean countries have begun to democratise the candidate selection process, in some English speaking Caribbean, candidate selection is still partly determined by the party leaders who continue to play the role of gatekeeper. In such instances women have a difficult time trying to break through the barriers as these gatekeepers are often times men who may see any attempt by women to

ascend to political office as a threat to their longstanding political power. In instances where processes or procedures are in place to legislatively or bureaucratically account for women – such as quotas – this is extremely advantageous, since it guarantees that a particular number of women will automatically gain access to power. Of course, simply having women in these positions does not mean automatic meaningful and sustained change would be engendered nor for that matter will it ensure that they will be able to influence the process in such a way as to guarantee all women the ability to gain access. Nonetheless, such a system at least provides women with some measure of opportunity rather than denying them any type of entry.

### Including women

CEDAW regards 33% as the critical mass of women required for meaningful decision making. While in the 1990s only six parliaments worldwide showed a 30% female representation, by 2008 this had grown phenomenally with some 24 countries had surpass the 30% target. In so far as the Caribbean is concerned, only Guyana, under its proportional representation system, comes close to this goal. In the Commonwealth Caribbean, a total number of two thousand, seven hundred thirty six (2,736) persons contested general elections between 1992 and 2005 (excluding Guyana). Of that total, two thousand, three hundred and seventy four (2,374) of them were males, with three hundred and sixty two (362) females. In 2000 15 women were elected to the Puerto Rican legislature, 8 to the House and 7 to the Senate, representing 19% of all legislative seats. In 2008 twenty four women were elected to the bicameral legislature. V. Eudine Barriteau argues that:

Even though women have been able to vote and stand for elections for over sixty years in the Caribbean, at the end of the decade of the 1990s the region still lacks a critical mass of women as key political decision makers.<sup>43</sup>

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43. Violet Eudine Barriteau, 'Beyond Backlash: The Frontal Assault on containing Caribbean Women in the Decade of the 1990s', in *Gender Equality in the Caribbean: Reality or Illusion*, eds. Gemma Tang Nain & Barbara Bailey. (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2003), 201-232.

While the numbers compare favourably with the position of women in South Asia and Africa, with India showing 8.8%, Sri Lanka 4.9%, Pakistan 2.8% in 1999, much more needs to be done. However it is to be noted that globally gender balance is greatest in Rwanda where women make up half of the members of parliament. Mozambique, Angola and South Africa also have more than 30% representation of women in their parliaments. Mozambique where, due to a 30% gender quota adopted by FRELIMO in the 1994 elections women's representation in the legislature women increased to 24.4% and has since increased to 30%. It is not only in terms of parliamentary representation that women have achieved some measure of success in these African countries, for women have experienced increasingly greater representation in the executive branch of government. Further in the 2008 elections in Rwanda, women took a majority of the parliament seats having won 56.3% of the seats in the lower chamber. The Scandinavian countries have also recorded an exceptionally high level of women representation in their national parliaments with approximately 38% of the parliamentary seats. While the English-speaking Caribbean has done considerably better than several developing countries, nonetheless more political space needs to be created for women, as the examples of newly emerging democracies of Rwanda, Mozambique and South Africa show.

It therefore seems clear that universal adult suffrage and international and regional declarations that held out much hope for women have largely proven to be illusionary. Universal adult suffrage did not automatically correspond to political equality for women as it has not led to a plethora of women legislators. Indeed as the Inter parliamentary Union states;

Women's access to parliaments in the Caribbean states is erratic, as highlighted in Belize and Grenada. While women were appointed to nearly 40% of seats in the upper house in Belize, no women won election to the lower house. Just three women contested the lower house elections (compared with 90 men), none of whom was successful. In Grenada, the biggest percentage point drop—13.3—was registered after the number of women members halved from four to two in the lower house. Yet

at the same time, women were appointed to 30% of seats in the upper house. With small chamber sizes and the majority systems used to elect lower houses, women's chances of success are limited.<sup>44</sup>

At the end of the last cycle of elections in the Commonwealth Caribbean, only Trinidad and Tobago was able to show a 30% female representation. Most of the elected chambers in parliaments in the other Caribbean countries show less than 10% female representation. In St. Lucia for example, not a single woman was elected to the House of Assembly. This is a significant turnaround from the pre 2006 situation. Indeed following the 1997 elections, two women were elected to the parliament, the first two since the only successful female legislator had been elected in 1974 to the parliament. Recently, former Prime Minister and now Leader of the Opposition of the St. Lucia Labour Party indicated that the party had nominated 4 women to contest the 2011 constitutionally due elections. This he acknowledged was the "most ever women candidates by a political party in St. Lucia".<sup>45</sup> Dr. Kenny Anthony went to say that "The women of St. Lucia can rest assured that their issues and interests will be well represented in a new St. Lucia Labour Party government".<sup>46</sup> While the 4 selected women still do not constitute the 30% representation of women at the party level that Caribbean governments pledged to commit themselves to when they accepted the Latimer House Guidelines and the Kingstown Way Forward, nonetheless it is a step in the right direction.

Barbados has remained static in terms of female representation at 3 female elected parliamentarians. In the elections of 2003, a total number of 3 women, that is Elizabeth Thompson, Mia Mottley, and Dame Billie Miller successfully contested the elections. Billie Miller is in fact one of the most electorally successful women in the Commonwealth Caribbean having won 6 elections of the seven that she has contested since 1976. In the 2008 general elections, three women again won the elections, this time, the now ruling Democratic Labour Party was able to sit one successful female candidate.

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44. See, *Women in Parliament in 2008: The Year in Perspective*. Inter Parliamentary Union, 2009, pp.3-4.

45. *The Daily Nation*, "Four Women on SLP Slate", Tuesday March 29, 2011, p. 14.

46. *Ibid.*

**Table 1**

No. of Women Elected in Selected English speaking Caribbean Countries (1992-2005)

Country	Total. No. of Women Candidates	No. Elected (%)
Anguilla	9	0/0
Antigua & Barbuda	7	1/14.29
Barbados	24	10 /41.66
Belize	16	5/ 31.25
The Bahamas	57	18/31.58
Dominica	20	5/ 20.0
Grenada	33	10/ 30.30
Jamaica	61	20 /33.33
St. Kitts-Nevis	9	3/33.33
St. Lucia	13	4/30.76
St. Vincent & the Grenadines	9	5 /55.56
Trinidad and Tobago	87	21/23.59

Source: Cynthia Barrow-Giles and Tennyson S. D. Joseph, *General Elections and Voting in the English Speaking Caribbean 1992-2005*.

**Table 2**

No. of Women Elected in Selected English speaking Caribbean Countries (1992-2005)

Election date and year	Country	No of Candidates	No and % Of Women Elected
January 2009	Antigua and Barbuda	17	1/5.88
January 08, 2008	Barbados	30	3/10.0
May 02, 2007	Bahamas	41	5/12.20
February 07, 200	Belize	31	0/00
December 18, 2009	Dominica	21	2/9.52
July 08, 2008	Grenada	15	2/13.33
September 03,2007	Jamaica	60	8/13.33
December 11, 2006	St. Lucia	17	0/00
December 13, 2010	St. Vincent and the Grenadines	15	1/6.66
May 10, 2010	Trinidad and Tobago	41	13/31.7

Compiled from Reports on General Elections 2006-2010

## A review of electoral systems in the region

While it remains a truism that tinkering with institutional forms will not result in wide scale systemic change nor will it automatically transform the structural location of women, nonetheless it is clear that the choice of an electoral system does have an important impact on not only democratic participation generally but on women's inclusion specifically. Globally, the main choice of electoral system is between plurality-majority systems and proportional representation systems. Plurality-majority systems most often use single member districts. In a plurality or first past-the-post system, the winner is the candidate with the most votes, not necessarily an absolute majority of the votes and the objective is to secure the victory of a government with a workable majority. On the other hand, the premise of proportional representation systems is to reduce the disparity between a party's share of the national votes and its share of the parliamentary seats. Proportional systems are typically defined by three features;

- a larger number of representatives to be selected from a district
- regulations on how political parties constitute their PR list
- these are combined with a third dimension.

Typically therefore, countries which are defined by an electoral system which is defined by proportionality maintain lower thresholds of representation. It is this latter feature which results in the increased likelihood of small minority parties gaining representation. Further as many newer democracies in Africa, and older democracies in Scandinavia show, it is also clear that it has the capacity to favour women.

While there are currently three electoral systems employed in the English speaking Caribbean, generally speaking, the democratic systems in the region are supported by two separate and distinct electoral systems. In Guyana, the system is based on proportional representational (PR) system, whilst the rest of the Commonwealth Caribbean relies on the system of first past the post (FPTP) method. A deviation from the

dominant model is the ‘Voting at Large System’ used in Montserrat, which was introduced in Montserrat as a direct adjustment to volcanic eruptions in that country.

Given the Caribbean’s adherence to the British political model, the region is distinguished by its heavy reliance on the FPTP system. Under this system, the country is divided into a number of constituencies and electors cast their vote (i.e. one vote) for one of a slate of candidates. The winner is the candidate, who receives the largest number, or plurality of the votes cast in the single member constituency. The winning party is the one that wins in the majority of constituencies. The system therefore makes no attempt to create a parliament in which the feelings of the nation are accurately reflected.

### **Proportional representation in Guyana**

As an electoral system, Proportional representation requires that the distribution of seats be proportionate to the distribution of the popular vote among competing political parties. The main feature of the PR system under the Guyanese constitution is that it is designed to produce a close correlation between the proportion of the total votes cast for a party and the proportion of seats which the party gains in the legislature. This model therefore stands in stark contrast to the dominant model in the region.

### **Voting at large in Montserrat**

The third model used in the region is “Voting at Large”. The introduction of Voting at large in Montserrat in 2000, eliminated the single member constituency voting and converted the entire island was treated as a single constituency. Under the new system, open or the plural vote was introduced. Eligible voters in Montserrat are therefore given the legal right to vote for all the members of the legislative council with voters being permitted to cast their vote for candidates of different parties. In the 2001 and 2006 general elections Montserratians were given the task of having to select up to nine (9) candidates out of a possible twenty four (24) and twenty nine (29) political party candidates and independents. In



this system women performed remarkable well and significantly better than the system of first past the post.

## Institutionalising gender quotas in Guyana

While the idea of institutionalising a gender quota system for political representation is extremely controversial, nonetheless, its implementation has positively resulted in women's increase presence nationally in countries which have adopted it as a critical democratic institution. As the 2009, inter parliamentary report on the status of women in parliaments in the year 2009 argues;

*...difference between chambers elected with proportional representation and majority electoral systems is explained by the fact that the former system provides greater opportunities for increasing women's representation, such as by introducing special measures. As candidates are elected on political party lists, political parties are afforded the opportunity to nominate women in winnable positions.<sup>47</sup>*

Prevailing views are polarised between those who see quotas as having a positive or a negative effect on the empowerment of women. Indeed we can identify three dominant and interrelated positions on the usefulness of the quota system to the overall cause of engendering democratic participation.<sup>48</sup> Views therefore vary from those who view its implementation as;

- the politics of discrimination and a violation of the principles of fairness in competition;
- the potential for the exacerbation of the failure to take women seriously problem of women in so far as their problem of not being taken seriously and:
- a reaffirmation of the structural barriers that prevent fair competition

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47. The See, Women in Parliament in 2008: The Year in Perspective. Inter Parliamentary Union , 2009, p.6

48. See The Implementation of Quotas: The Asian Experience, Quota Workshop Report Series, Jakarta, Indonesia, Sept, 2002. Institute for Democratic and Electoral reform (IDEA).

- the cultivation of a system of greater dependency on the party bosses.

With respect to the latter view it is contended that aspiring candidates trade in their independence for a dependency on the party bosses who will ultimately make a decision with respect to where candidates are located on the slate/list of candidates, oftentimes under a system of proportional representation.

Regionally Guyana represents a case study of facilitating the political equality of gender. Not only have recent constitutional modifications focused on creating gender justice with respect to work, citizenship, and other socio-economic issues but the post 1999 constitutional reform process also made provisions for the achievement women's political equality. In that regard, the 1999 Constitutional reform Commission recommended that there should be enshrined general principles in the Constitution that would encourage women's participation in public decision making. In the Commission's view, Parliament should make every effort to increase women's participation in the various processes and fora of decision making at the level of the National assembly. Specially, the Constitutional Reform Commission recommended that women should be accorded 33.3% representation in the national parliament. Accordingly, Part II, 11B (5 - 7) of the Representation of People's Act of Guyana, states that;

*(5) The total number of females on each party's national top-up list shall be at least one-third of the total number of persons on that list.*

*(6) The total number of females on each party's lists for geographical constituencies, taken together, shall be at least one-third of the total number of persons on those lists taken together for the geographical constituencies in which that party is contesting.*

*(7) There shall be no more than twenty percent of the number of geographical constituencies in which a party is contesting for which the party's geographical constituency list contains no females.*

The acceptance and application of the above principles as a constitutional provision has resulted in a level of female representation that is

unsurpassed/unprecedented in the Commonwealth Caribbean. Indeed no other Commonwealth Caribbean state has followed the model of Guyana and, politically, women continue to remain on the margins of the decision making process. Regional parliaments therefore remain bastions of maleness.

### **Party finances and electoral rules**

Regionally not only have been favoured in terms of candidate selection by political parties, but it is also argued that men have advantages in currying favours too, since they often have better connections and as a consequence are able to mobilise significantly higher levels of campaign funds than their female counterparts. Being accepted in primaries is thus difficult but success is not necessarily a guarantee of support of the party in terms of necessary financial capital outlay. In the Commonwealth Caribbean, electioneering has become an increasingly expensive enterprise. As women candidates tend to attract less campaign funding and support, both from their parties and from business, who tend not to consider women candidates worthy of that kind of investment. Often too, women complain that they are only allowed to stand in constituencies that are in some way or another unattractive, especially in terms of the strength of the other party or parties in those geographical spaces.

The data in the Commonwealth Caribbean point to the fact that several politically aspiring women choose to stand as independents for general elections. However the data suggest that this is not a rewarding strategy as the party system has become too entrenched regionally. In any event, this is not just confined to women candidates. Men who also contests elections as independents face similar difficulties as the electoral landscape shows that this is largely an unsuccessful road to travel.

One of the critical issues confronting all candidates and parties in the region is election financing. Most elections laws in the region make little reference to financing of parties and candidates, amounts spent, limits, prohibitions or quotas. Significant reformation is therefore regarded as a *sin qua non* to democratic consolidation regionally. Indeed the end

game of such reform should be the overall protection of the system against illicit sources of financing, undue influence peddling and greater transparency, fairness and accountability of the system. For many, the answer partly rests on the introduction of partial state funding. In this way too not only would third and minor parties be assisted but women could also be the beneficiaries. In this case, the state could require all parties who benefit from state funding to adhere to the various agreements that impose upon the state an obligation to achieve a 30% representation of women. As such legal or constitutional requirements would speed up the rate of change in the Commonwealth Caribbean which is still significantly low.

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