

Briefing Paper

GENDER AND DEMOCRACY

BP 08/11

Author Vicky Randall

This briefing paper addresses the 'gender' dimension of democracy and focuses on the democratic representation and participation of women. Beyond this primary focus, paper examines the language of gender and questions of identity, theories of gender and how women are understood in society in general, and the role of women in democracy. The paper shows that as of 2010, women still only make up a little over 19% of all parliaments around the world, but this average conceals a range from a high of over 55% in Rwanda to a low of 16% in the United States. In light of this variation, the paper discusses the arguments and mechanisms for increased participation of women, as well as the empirical findings about women's participation that will be of interests to policy makers and practitioners interested in the gendered dimensions of democracy.

Introduction and Background

Both theoretical and practical interest in the relationship between gender and democracy have surged, first with 'second-wave' feminism from the 1960s and then with 'third wave' democratisation from the 1970s. The relationship between gender and democracy can be explored from many different angles, both empirical and theoretical – does democracy require gender equality for instance? Does democracy increase prospects for gender equality? However within this broad field there has long been a particular focus on the issue of women's political representation. The comparatively low levels of women's representation have been extensively documented; arguments have been developed – and contested – for why women's representation should be increased and there has been much discussion about the main practical obstacles to increasing their representation and the best means of overcoming this.

The scholarly literature on this subject has grown exponentially, in Britain, the United States and further afield. This has been in tandem with extensive political campaigning around the issue of women's representation. For instance in Britain during the 1980s the Labour Women's Action Committee (LWAC) helped to trigger change within the Labour Party and other

political parties have to varying degrees followed suit, whilst outside the parties the issue has been championed by campaigning organisations such as the 300 Group (1980-2002) and the recently reinvigorated Fawcett Society.

There has been increasing interest within international organisations. The issue was highlighted in the 1995 Beijing UN Women's Conference Platform for Action and has been incorporated into the objectives of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Millennium Development Goals. International democracy promotion agencies such as the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) have placed considerable emphasis on women's political representation. In some new or emerging democracies indeed the issue of women's political representation has been taken up by the political leadership almost as a symbolic marker of the country's democratic credentials.

Such a ferment of ideas has both reflected and advanced a veritable sea-change in public attitudes. Available studies show increasingly positive attitudes towards having women in political leadership roles, in many

countries, for instance in Northern Ireland, albeit with some notable exceptions. But rates of women's political representation have not changed so dramatically. Even in Britain, supposedly a relatively advanced democracy, following the 2010 General Election women still only constituted 22% of the membership of the House of Commons

This paper begins with a brief consideration of the concept of gender, an account of the way in which issues in the field of gender and democracy have emerged, and identification of the specific questions concerning women's political representation which have come to the fore. The following section looks more closely at the way these questions have been taken up, through a combination of more normative arguments and empirical investigation.

Key conceptual issues and problem areas

This briefing paper is concerned with the 'gender' dimension of democracy. Readers probably have an everyday understanding of 'gender' as in practice referring to women and indeed the main focus here will be on the democratic representation and participation of women, as opposed to men. However there is more to the issue of gender and democracy than that and it is accordingly necessary to say something about the language of gender, and its implications. The use of this language, rather than just talking about women and men, or the sexes, originated with Marxist-feminists, and has signified first of all that our identities as men or women are to a significant extent 'socially constructed' rather than innate. This further means that these identities are not fixed but culturally and historically variable. Going one step further still, the implication is that the identities of different women within the same society vary one from another, for instance according to social class or race.

The language of gender has the obvious virtue of undermining essentialist and potentially conservative arguments about women's nature that have been used to justify women's political exclusion. It is also much more realistic. However this language does also open up the possibility that women are too differentiated as a category for meaningful political claims to be advanced in their common name. Taken to its post-structuralist extreme, this language threatens to deconstruct and problematise

the concept of 'woman' altogether, although such a position is much more likely to be found within academia than in the public political arena.

Besides talking about 'gender' as a subject category, there is often reference to institutions being 'gendered'. According to Connell (1990), for instance, political institutions embody gender relationships themselves and also influence the construction of gender categories within society. By the same token democracy and democratic institutions can be described as gendered. Critics have referred to the persistently masculine character of contemporary democracies.

There has long been interest in the relationship between democracy and gender, not least amongst the early suffragettes. That relationship is discussed from different perspectives. The question may be asked whether democracy or democratisation provides new opportunities for gender equality. Or feminists may argue that 'genuine', or deep, democracy is inconceivable without gender equality.

However the central focus of these discussions and the topic to be pursued here is the political participation and representation of women. To the extent that democracy is about popular political participation, women's political exclusion, depending on your point of view, either constitutes a major shortcoming of existing democracies or means they do not qualify as democracies at all. Initially the key issue area was the vote. New Zealand was the first country to grant women the vote, in 1893, followed by Finland in 1906. In Britain women aged 21 and over were given the vote in 1928. Gradually most other countries have followed suit, the most recent being Switzerland in 1971 and Kazakhstan in 1994. But women still do not have the vote in Brunei, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates.

With the gaining of female suffrage, attention has shifted in particular to women's political representation, in the sense of their presence within the democratically constituted leadership. First there has been a systematic effort to monitor levels of women's political representation, to discern trends and to make comparisons cross-nationally and amongst different government levels within nations.

Second, arguments have been advanced and debated as to why these levels of representation generally need to

be much higher. Some of these arguments are primarily normative, invoking for instance notions of social justice or fairness, but others refer to the likely consequences of women's increased representation in ways that are more open to empirical verification. In different forms the question is asked as to whether and how 'women make a difference'? Do they bring particular distinct and desirable qualities into the political process? Are they perhaps more inclined to be peace-makers than men? Are they less likely to be corrupt? Feminist writers in particular have invoked political theorist Hanna Pitkin's distinction(1967) between descriptive and substantive representation. Pitkin originally argued that descriptive, or mirror representation, in which the representative resembles those being represented in some key attribute such as gender, does not necessarily increase the likelihood of substantive representation, in which the representative stands for the views or objective interests of those being represented. Feminists have sought to demonstrate either in theoretical terms or more empirically that increased levels of women's (descriptive) representation do lead to greater substantive representation of women.

Thirdly, to the extent that it is believed that women's representation continues to be too low, there is further empirical interest in ascertaining why this is so and in identifying the principal barriers. Sometimes this is discussed in terms of the intersection of demand and supply, although clearly these are not always easy to separate out. Related to this there is considerable discussion concerning the most efficacious means of increasing women's presence. In particular such discussion has touched on three areas. One is campaign finance. Do women candidates have equal access to such funding and if not how can this be remedied? Another is the electoral system : do particular types of electoral system, other things being equal, improve women's chances of being selected as candidates and being elected? There is widespread agreement that the First Past the Post (FPTP) system found in many countries including Britain has been disadvantageous for women. Another much debated issue concerns adoption of gender quotas, either by political parties themselves or through reserving legislative seats for women. Questions to be asked include: how and when are such quotas

adopted, are they successful in practice in securing increased women's representation and are they morally and politically acceptable?

Evidence and Analysis

Levels of women's political representation

By now we have a great deal of information about levels of women's political representation. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) has for instance been collating such information over a long period (see its web-site at www.ipu.org). By 2010 women made up 19.3% of members in around 186 national parliaments (in single or lower houses).

This average figure however conceals major variations both across regions and between individual countries. In the 1980s and 1990s it was the Nordic countries that appeared to take the lead. By 1991 women already constituted over 30% of parliamentarians in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. These countries still feature, with Iceland, in the top 13, but it is Rwanda, following its 2008 General Election, which comes first at over 56% while South Africa and Cuba are third and fourth respectively. Of course the existence of a national parliament is not synonymous with democracy and as mentioned earlier it could be argued that in all three of these developing countries high levels of women's political representation serve to some degree to deflect attention away from a serious democratic deficit.

At the other end of the scale, are parliaments totally devoid of women members or where they constitute a minute fraction. It would be fair to say that Islamic Middle Eastern countries figure disproportionately amongst them. Even so there are many developed democracies which still see relatively low levels of women's representation, and of these the lowest scoring is actually the United States at 16.8%.

While attention has particularly focused on women's parliamentary presence, there is also interest in their representation in other levels and aspects of government. It used to be suggested that rates of women's representation tended to be higher at sub-national level partly because the institutions concerned were less

powerful than national institutions – an instance of a wider maxim that women's presence was in inverse proportion to the presence of power. But patterns vary from country to country. Certainly a very striking and well known case is that of the assemblies established in Wales and Scotland in 1999 as part of the New Labour government's devolution policy. In Wales 40% of seats in the new assembly went to women AMs (Assembly Members); following the second Welsh Assembly election in 2003 the figure rose to 50% though it fell to 47% after the third election in 2007. However one reason for this exceptional pattern is that these were brand new assemblies, so women were not in competition with male incumbents. The Labour Party also used positive measures to promote women's representation, as discussed further below.

At any rate it is clear that in global terms the level of women's representation has grown over time. In 1945, within the 26 national parliaments which then existed, women constituted only 3% of members. By now we have seen that the average percentage is 19.3%, an increase of 16.3%. This is still less than one fifth, however, and has taken 65 years to achieve!

Arguments for enhancing women's political representation

Women's level of political representation typically remains low and is rising only very gradually. Does this matter? We have seen that a number of arguments have been advanced for increasing women's representation. Sometimes it is presented simply as an issue of fairness or social justice. Alternatively it is argued that women's visible presence in representative political roles is important symbolically; it signifies women's equal political status and capabilities with men and encourages other women and girls to believe this could be a realistic aspiration for themselves.

A third kind of argument with a long history maintains that women have special qualities to bring to democratic institutions. This claim, which relies of course on a strong sense of the differences, either innate or acquired, between men and women, was regularly advanced by those campaigning for women's suffrage – women were depicted as more caring and less corrupt. It continues to resurface. For instance in the violence-prone context of

Colombian politics, it has been contended that women politicians would bring a stronger commitment to peace. The World Bank itself, in a policy statement on gender equality, has pointed to a strong relationship between relatively high levels of women's political involvement and low levels of corruption, suggesting that this provides 'additional support for having more women in politics' (World Bank 2001, cited by Goetz 2007).

But a more recent and sophisticated argument for increasing women's political representation is encapsulated in Phillips' phrase 'the politics of presence'. Rather than accepting Pitkin's view that descriptive representation is no guarantee of substantive representation and so by implication should not be of concern, Phillips, as we have seen, has argued that descriptive representation *is* of significance for substantive representation. Her reasoning is complex but we can pull out two central elements. First whilst acknowledging the extreme social constructionist position that would question whether we could talk about 'women', or women's interests' as a distinct and objective category, she suggests that it is indeed, and for the moment, possible to identify a range of distinct women's interests. 'Women have distinct interests in relation to child-bearing (for any foreseeable future, an exclusively female affair); and as society is currently constituted they also have particular interests arising from their exposure to sexual harassment and violence, their unequal position in the division of paid and unpaid labour, and their exclusion from most arenas of economic or political power' (Phillips, 1995, pp67-8). Second, however, she accepts that interests are nonetheless not that easily defined – in fact if women's interests were objective and transparent their representation might be less of a problem. But precisely because interests tend not to be so self-evident but come to be defined through political deliberation, it matters 'who does the representing'. More specifically, where existing political understanding has been shaped a certain way and 'curtailed by orthodoxies that rendered alternatives invisible, there will be no satisfactory solution short of changing the people who represent and develop the ideas' (ibid,pp70-1).

Whilst arguments from justice or in terms of symbolic impact are unlikely to be accompanied by buttressing empirical evidence, when it comes to claims about

women's special contribution to politics or the need for women's descriptive representation as a means to substantive representation, empirical evidence has been both mobilised and contested. Advocates of increased women's political representation have sometimes claimed that their participation could improve democratic politics. First women have been depicted as peacemakers. There are plenty of examples of women working together to promote peace or oppose state violence: in Latin America for instance we have seen the famous Madres of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina protesting against the 'disappearance' of their children under the brutal military regime, and similarly more recently the Guatemalan Mother of the Disappeared. In Colombia La Ruta Pacifica campaigned for an end to the continuing violence (for this and many similar movements see Cockburn, 2007). Other well-known cases include the Women's Peace Coalition in Serbia and Kosovo, and the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition which many accounts suggest made a significant contribution to the Irish peace process.

There are also attitudinal survey data (cited in Regan and Paskeviciute 2003) indicating that men and women do differ in their evaluation of the use of force to achieve foreign policy goals even if there is no significant disagreement regarding the goals themselves. Such a difference was observed for instance in studies of attitudes towards the use of force in the first Gulf War of 1993.

This does not amount to systematic evidence concerning the impact of women politicians of course and there are many individual women leaders who could hardly qualify as peacemakers – Golda Meir, Margaret Thatcher to name but two. Regan and Paskeviciute (2003) find a statistical correlation between the levels of women's presence within national legislatures and the likelihood of pairs of countries being drawn into a military dispute, although this is not the focus of their study and the explanation for this association is likely to be complex.

Women politicians are also sometimes portrayed as less corrupt. This was an argument advanced by some suffragists, and has re-emerged in the context of development theory. Goetz (2007) refers to this as a new myth in the making. As with women's pacifism, this is a difficult proposition to test. One study, by Dollar et al

(1999) uses the International Country Risk Guide to obtain measures of corruption for over 100 countries. The authors find a high correlation between low levels of corruption and higher proportions of women in the national legislature, although they also find that both variables are strongly correlated with development as measured via GDP per capita. This leads them to conclude (p8) that 'there may be extremely important spinoffs from increasing female representation: if women are less likely than men to behave opportunistically, then bringing more women into government may have significant benefits for society in general'.

Goetz is wary of such reasoning. Apart from the fact that politics abounds with instances of corrupt women politicians – the example of the former Chief Minister of the Indian state of Tamilnadu, Jayalitha comes to mind – she suggests first that Dollar et al's findings may reflect the fact that relatively high levels of women's representation tend to go with more open and democratic political systems. She also suggests that the relevance of being a woman may be more in terms of the way this shapes and limits one's access to *opportunities* for corruption.

Related to these questions about women's contribution to politics it is frequently suggested that they may bring a distinct 'feminised' style of politics, characterised as more consensual (as opposed to adversarial), collaborative and inclusive. Childs (2004) interviewing newly elected New Labour women MPs found that the majority of her respondents believed themselves to be practising politics in a feminised way. She was told that women 'don't do as much standing up, shouting on the floor of the House', and have 'a less combative and aggressive style' (p5). Obviously numbers of women MPs in the British Parliament have remained relatively low but another more recent study (Jones et al 2009) has focused on the Welsh Assembly where as we have seen women for a time constituted 50% of the membership. Here it was found that many AMs, men as well as women, believed that the new Assembly differed strikingly in style from the adversarial politics of Westminster. The gender balance was acknowledged to be a significant, though not the only, contributory factor.

From a feminist perspective, especial interest has focused on the claim that women will be more inclined to further 'women's interests'. This claim is for instance at the least implicit in the 'politics of presence' thesis. There are clear problems in defining, and operationalising measures of 'women's interests'. We go back to the question of whether women do in fact have significant interests in common. Such doubts are strongest in the context of deeply unequal societies; how can women of the wealthy elite understand the experiences of women from the poorest peasant groups, the lowest castes, the ranks of disenfranchised immigrants? It is also obvious that many individual women politicians have shown minimal concern to promote women's interests on any definition.

Systematic studies are relatively few but one important exception is Wängnerud's study (2000) of men and women in the Swedish Riksdag. Wängnerud used parliamentary survey data for 1985, 1988 and 1994 to see how far there was greater support amongst the women MPs for women's interests. Acknowledging that 'women's interests' was a contentious concept, she proposed (2000:70) to define it in the following way : it should be understood as comprising recognition of women as a social category; acknowledgement of the unequal balance of power between the sexes; and occurrence of policies designed to increase the autonomy of female citizens. Wängnerud examined MPs' commitment to women's interests through their responses to a battery of questions. She found that more than half the women but only 10% of the men considered they had an important duty to forward women's interests and that it was almost exclusively women MPs who pursued issues of gender equality. All in all she found it difficult to avoid the conclusion that 'women's interests are primarily represented by female politicians' (p84).

Here we must note one very relevant factor concerning both the Swedish Riksdag during the period of Wängnerud's study and of the Welsh Assembly observed by Jones et al. In both cases women formed a substantial proportion of the assembly members. Women were over 30% of Swedish MPs and for a time 50% of Welsh AMs. This brings us to the whole question of 'critical mass' which in itself could be seen as part of the argument for enhancing women's political representation. The

influential concept of 'critical mass' is actually borrowed from nuclear physics! A popular argument has developed that individual 'token' women representatives are unlikely to make much substantive difference to legislative outcomes; before they can make an impact on legislative style, output and so on, their numbers need to increase to a certain critical mass. The figure that has emerged as a crucial cutting-off point and been taken up in many policy-making contexts is 30%. A number of empirical studies, based for instance in Norway and in US state legislatures, have seemed to lend support to this general thesis. It also provides powerful ammunition for gender quota advocates discussed further below.

Attractive as the critical mass thesis is, as Childs (2008) points out, it represents something of a distortion or simplification of what the feminist academics whose work originally gave rise to it, were trying to say. In addition subsequent critics have suggested that the role of key actors may be more important than that of a 'critical mass' and more generally that the 30% figure seems quite arbitrary. There have also been empirical studies that call the thesis into question as it stands. For instance Grey (2002) studied New Zealand's House of Representatives where between 1975 and 1999 the proportion of women MPs rose from 4% to 29%. In order to ascertain their impact on the parliamentary agenda, rather than surveying attitudes, she preferred to examine archival records of parliamentary debates, focusing in particular on the issues of child care and parental leave. Grey did find an initial strong relationship between the increase in women's presence to around 20% (clearly well below the 30% figure) and a growing focus on these issues. But the subsequent increase to 29% by 1996 occurred in a context of growing social conservatism and a possible male backlash in which the issues were again to a degree sidelined. Grey concluded that 'For critical mass to be a viable concept, it must take account of the influence of entrenched attitudes and positional power' (2002:28).

Ways to enhance women's political representation

Although, then, much of the empirical evidence sustaining arguments for increasing women's political presence is fragmentary and contested, the normative arguments remain compelling and find support in an increasingly

vocal political constituency. But even where there is agreement over this political objective, there is much scope for debate concerning the best means of achieving it.

The background to this is obviously the broader question of the traditionally low status of women in society and analysts will vary regarding the respective weight of explanation they place on physiological, cultural, and economic or 'structural' factors. But where the focus is more specifically on women's political participation discussion has often been conducted in terms of the intersection between the 'supply' of women willing and able to participate on the one hand and the 'demand' of (traditionally male-dominated) political institutions and processes on the other. Of course these two aspects are not entirely independent of one another. Anticipated resistance or prejudice may constrain supply while demand may be affected by the perception that women lack political interest or ambition. Factors relevant to the supply can include cultural constraints (to a degree internalised), constraining family roles and responsibilities, lack of relevant educational and professional qualifications and lack of independent access to relevant financial resources. Factors relevant to demand include the way that political institutions are presently 'gendered' or embody particular power relations and patterns of belief associated with them (Connell, 1990).

Again, when the focus is on improving the numbers of women recruited to national legislatures, it is important to examine the process by which parliamentary candidates are selected. What measures could be taken to increase the likelihood of women's selection as candidates, and moreover, where the notion is applicable, of their selection in relatively 'safe seats' rather than marginal or hopeless ones. One aspect that has been considered is campaign finance. Election campaigns have always been costly and developments in communications media may well have made them more so. In the US, Emily's List (Emily is an acronym for Early Money Is Like Yeast) was founded in 1984 to raise money for pro-choice (that is the right to choose to have an abortion) female candidates. For the 2006 elections it raised around \$46m for the candidates it was supporting. Similar schemes were established in Australia and in the UK where Emily's

List UK was launched in 1993 to help women parliamentary candidates in the Labour Party.

Much debate has centred on the electoral system. It has been suggested that women's chance of being selected as a parliamentary candidate is substantially higher under a PR (Proportional Representation) party list system than under a First Past the Post system. The main gatekeepers here are political parties. Under FPTP they select only one candidate per district, creating a zero sum contest where there is no incentive to deviate from the 'standard' type – traditionally male. But in PR list systems, with multi-member districts, there is a more conscious process of balancing the party ticket so as to draw support from different constituencies, including women.

A number of studies appeared to confirm this relationship within the main developed democracies. Matland (1998) set out to test whether this finding also held in democracies in the developing world. He used data on the 24 OECD countries and a further 16 developing world democracies. His own regression analysis confirmed the strength of the relationship in developed democracies; his findings implied that changing from a majoritarian to a proportional electoral system would result in a 15.6% increase in the proportion of women in the legislature. However he found that within the developing countries, the electoral system did not make a statistically significant difference. He suggested two possible reasons: that women themselves were not demanding increased representation and/or that party leaders saw the costs of running female candidates as too high. All this led him to conclude that there was a 'minimum development level' below which the nature of the electoral system was largely irrelevant. A more recent 'global' statistical study (Tripp and Kang, 2008) looking at 155 countries, though primarily focused on gender quotas, as discussed further below, concluded that whilst not as crucial as gender quotas, the electoral system did indeed play an important determining role.

Over time interest has increasingly focused on the impact on levels of women's political representation of gender quotas, that is where quotas are set for the proportion of female candidates for parliamentary seats or of parliamentary seats reserved for women. There is by now

a considerable literature on the subject as well as a Global Database of Quotas for Women whose main sponsors are International IDEA and the IPU (see www.quotaproject.org/). The first gender quotas were introduced in the 1970s in Norway. They were subsequently adopted in a number of European countries; for instance they were adopted by the British Labour Party in 1992. Their adoption in a succession of Latin American and African countries largely took off from the mid-90s, receiving a boost from their endorsement at the Fourth World Women's Conference at Beijing in 1995. By 2006 they had been adopted in more than 84 countries (Tripp and Kang 2008).

However, gender quotas come in different forms. A basic distinction is between those adopted voluntarily and those imposed or legislated by the state, but a second distinction can be made between those adopted within political parties when selecting parliamentary candidates and the reservation of specific parliamentary seats for women. With these distinctions in mind, one can talk about three broad types of quota. First have been gender quotas voluntarily adopted by parties. This has been the pattern observable in a succession of European countries, going back we have seen to the 1970s. Alternatively party quotas have been imposed by legislation or constitutional amendment. This pattern is generally of more recent origin and particularly associated with developing countries. Tripp and Kang (2008) found that of their 155 countries, voluntary party quotas had emerged in 61 and compulsory party quotas in 28. In addition a smaller number of countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East (there were 12 by 2006) have adopted a system of reserving a share of seats, normally 20-30%, for women within parliament. This is the system adopted under Rwanda's 2003 Constitution, for example, which currently has the highest proportion of women in any national legislature in the world. Sometimes a contrast is drawn between the voluntary 'incremental' quota path that emerged over several decades, beginning in Scandinavia and the later 'fast track' quotas imposed from above.

One question is how far these different forms of quota do in fact succeed in increasing levels of women's political representation. While the (compulsory) reserved seats approach ensures compliance, and there is also a

reasonably good record where political parties voluntarily opt for gender quotas, when these are imposed on parties compliance levels can be very poor. Party leaders are not necessarily committed to the policy; they may claim that not enough women are coming forward, or even if they adopt women candidates they can place them low down the list, in party list systems, or in unwinnable seats.

In these circumstances there has been some debate about the overall efficacy of gender quotas simply in terms of increasing women's legislative presence (they may well have other virtues for instance as a symbolic objective around which to mobilise or in terms of their political education function). Earlier cross-national studies found little statistical evidence that the presence of gender quotas (of whatever kind) was associated with higher levels of women in national parliaments. However Tripp and Kang argue that these studies were undertaken before the impact of the more recent wave of gender quota adoptions in developing countries. Their own analysis, using data for 2006 from 155 countries, leads them to conclude that gender quotas do indeed have a significant and positive effect.

Practical implications

Within the broad field of gender and democracy, political activism and analysis have tended to focus on the issue of women's political representation. In particular much attention has been devoted to women's parliamentary presence. Globally speaking, it is clear that the proportion of women in national legislatures remains seriously low and that whilst it is certainly increasing, the process is extremely slow. Empirical evidence to support some of the claims made about what women politicians can bring to democratic politics is ambivalent at best. There do appear to be some supporting grounds for the idea of a necessary critical mass, in order for women to 'make a difference' but there is no 'iron law' and much depends on the specific political context. Notwithstanding, for many activists the present state of women's political representation remains unacceptable on basic normative grounds of social justice and political equality, as well as being incompatible with meaningful democracy.

In this context, practical interest has increasingly centred on the strategy of gender quotas. They have been

championed by women's groups within and outside political parties. National political elites have taken them up for a range of motives. They may be convinced by the arguments but at least as often it is more about wanting to be seen as modern, playing the gender card in competition with other parties or more broadly as a way of enhancing the democratic legitimacy of their regime. At the same time, following their inclusion in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, quotas have been endorsed by a succession of international organizations including the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Council of Europe, the Commonwealth, the South African Development Community and the Organization of American States (Krook, 2006).

But gender quotas have also met with resistance and criticism. One country which has witnessed a protracted campaign to institute reserved seats for women in the national legislature is India. Opponents have deployed a range of arguments but one of the most telling is the charge that the kind of women likely to be elected in this way will be from the already privileged and politically over-represented upper castes (Randall, 2006). More generally quotas have been criticised for being anti-meritocratic, and even discriminatory. One suspects that vested interests of existing male incumbents must further underlie some of this suspicion and certainly it has been evident that it has been easiest to institute quotas in instances where new representative institutions, even regimes, are being established. This was the case with the new legislative assemblies established in Wales and Scotland for example.

Related to this one can ask about the consequences for women politicians of entering parliament by means of a gender quota system. Even if we accept that gender quotas are an effective way of increasing women's political representation, Krook et al (2009: 2) suggest that 'the means by which women enter politics may influence how, why and to what extent their presence affects different types of representative processes'. Outlining an important new research agenda they suggest we need to know more about how the gender quota process affects the kinds of women elected, the form and content of policy-making and public attitudes towards women in politics. For instance some studies have found that

women selected in this way have felt under a particular obligation to promote the interests of women; on the other hand such women may be perceived as lacking the necessary qualities and skills that a more meritocratic contest could have ensured. In Britain we had a little taste of the possible adverse connotations with the epithet 'Blair's babes' used in reference to New Labour women MPs many of whom had been selected through all-women short lists.

Ultimately what this discussion suggests is that neither feminists nor indeed well-meaning policy-makers should regard gender quotas as some simple 'quick fix'. To the extent that actors are in a position to influence adoption of gender quotas, they need to reflect carefully on the type of quota and the nature of the political and cultural context into which it is being introduced.

Conclusion

This briefing paper has considered the issue of the relationship between gender and democracy with particular reference to the question of women's political representation. It has established the present low and only slowly improving levels of women's political presence within national legislatures and considered the arguments put forward in favour of increasing that presence. It has looked specifically at studies that seek to establish whether women politicians do indeed bring more peaceful attitudes to parliamentary proceedings, whether they are less corrupt than their male counterparts, whether they 'do' politics in a different way and whether their enhanced presence is likely to be associated with greater prominence of 'women's interests'. In the process it has considered the mediating concept of 'critical mass' or whether a certain proportion of women representatives is required before they begin to make a difference. The paper has then gone on to inquire about the reason for women's present underrepresentation and the most promising means of correcting this. Arguments about the need to enhance women's access to campaign finance and about the helpfulness of PR electoral systems have been

introduced, but we have noted the current general tendency to give pre-eminent attention to the impact of gender quotas.

It has to be said that a considerable body of data and analysis has amassed around the topics reviewed here. Levels of women's political representation are now extensively – and necessarily monitored. Gender quotas in particular have been the subject of a huge research effort both academic and under the auspices of democracy –promoting international organizations like IIDEA. It will remain important to observe and compare the experience of quotas, how, when and why they are adopted, cross-nationally. At the same time, as gender quotas spread, there are important new questions to explore, about their impact and interaction with the specificities of varying political contexts.

Select bibliography

Childs, S. (2004) 'A Feminised Style of Politics? Women MPs in the House of Commons', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 6, 3-19

Childs, S and Krook, M L (2008), 'Critical Mass Theory and Women's Political Representation', *Political Studies*, 56, 725-7236

Cockburn, C (2007), *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis*, London: Zed

Connell, R W (1990), 'The state, gender and sexual politics: Theory and appraisal', *Theory and Society*, 19, 507-544

Dollar, D, Fisman, R and Gatti, R (1999), 'Are Women Really the Fairer Sex? Corruption and Women in Government', Working Paper Series No 4, World Bank

Goetz, A M (2007), 'Political Cleaners: Women as the New Anti-Corruption Force?' *Development and Change*, 38 (1), 87-105.

Grey, S (2002), 'Does Size Matter? Critical Mass and New Zealand's Women MPs', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 55, 19-29

Jones, S, Charles, N and Davies, C A (2009) 'Transforming Masculinist Political Cultures? Doing Politics in New Political Institutions', *Sociological Research Online*, 14 (2) (www.socresonline.org.uk/14/2)

Krook, M L (2006), 'Reforming Representation: The Diffusion of Candidate Gender Quotas Worldwide', *Politics and Gender*, 2, 303-327.

Krook, M L, Franseschet, S and Piscopo, J M (2009), 'The Impact of Gender Quotas: A Research Agenda', paper presented to the First European Conference on Politics and Gender, Queen's University Belfast.

Matland, R E (1998) 'Women's Representation in national Legislatures: Developed and Developing Countries', *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 23 (1), 109-125

Phillips, A (1998), *The Politics of Presence*, Oxford University Press

Pitkin, H F (1967), *The Concept of Representation*, University of California Press: Berkeley

Randall, V (2006), 'Legislative Gender Quotas and Indian Exceptionalism: The Travails of the Women's Reservation Bill', *Comparative Politics*, 39 (1), 63-82.

Regan, P M and Paskeviciute, A (2003), 'Women's Access to Politics and Peaceful States', *Journal of Peace Research*, 40 (3), 287-302

Tripp, A M and Kang, A (2008), 'The Global Impact of Quotas: On the Fast Track to Increased Female Legislative Representation', *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (3), 338-361.

Wängnerud, L (2000), 'Testing the Politics of Presence: Women's Representation in the Swedish Riksdag', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 23 (1), 67-91

World Bank (2001) *Engendering Development through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources and Voice*, Oxford University Press.