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# Barriers to Women's Participation in Parliament

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by Shirley Dysart, MLA

*Delegates to the 1993 Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Group (CWPG) in Cyprus noted that half the sessions at the Small Countries Conference were chaired by women and that women played significant roles as panelists, secretaries and rapporteurs at the Plenary Conference. At the same time, they recognized a glaring deficiency of female representation at CPA conferences and seminars and expressed concern about the status of the CWPG at Plenary Conferences and the general lack of Association support for women parliamentarians. CWGP Members unanimously agreed the Executive Committee constitute a task force to investigate barriers to women's participation in Parliament and in the CPA which would consist of the three women parliamentarians on the executive committee who would report through the CWPG to the 1994 General Assembly. Named to the Task Force were Shirley Dysart, then Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick; Beryl A. Evans, MLC, Australia; and Winnifred Nyiva Kitili Mwendwa, MP, Kenya. This article looks at the problems and prospects for women's participation in CPA and in Parliaments generally.*

**W**hat is missing from every official photograph of delegates at annual Commonwealth Parliamentary Conferences? The answer, of course is a significant number of women delegates! Current political and constitutional arrangements everywhere assume that the masculine majority in office can – and does – speak adequately for women. The national interest is identified and articulated overwhelmingly by men. What men perceive as important assumes women's tacit approval and agreement. The interests of both genders are assumed to be identical. Many women and many men disagree. The fact is that a world managed by men has a lot to answer



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*Shirley Dysart was the first woman elected to represent the Liberal Party in the Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick. She was Interim Leader of the Liberal Party, Minister of Education, and the first woman Speaker of the Legislative Assembly.*

for when they have managed to transform the traditional food producers of Africa, namely women, into the saddest victims of famine and shortages.<sup>1</sup>

Women comprise more than half the world's population, yet in the majority of the world's democratic countries where universal suffrage is and has been in place for decades, democracy is not, in fact, completely at work. Except in rare instances, the laws of the land are drafted, formulated, debated, passed and implemented by men.

Unless women are prepared to inch along for another several hundreds years waiting until society ever so slowly evolves – it is incumbent upon women at all levels of society to take action. The fastest way for women to attain legislative and economic power is to take control of the power which is rightfully theirs and of which they are currently bereft.

***Despite the fact that most countries use democratic methods of choosing political leaders and that women make up half the electorates, relatively few women reach the highest levels of political participation and even fewer become public decision makers. Women are largely absent from most forums where policy decisions affecting women's daily lives are being made.***

While few women are restricted in law, a wide gap remains between women's *de jure* right to participate in the electoral process and their *de facto* actual participation. By 1989 there were almost no countries where men could vote or stand for office but women could not. An in-depth study of the world-wide phenomenon of underrepresentation of women in positions of political power would take into account differences between more industrialized and less industrialized countries, voting systems, selection processes, the history of universal suffrage, and the importance of the legislative chamber.

#### **Barriers to Women's Election to Office**

The task force identified a number of barriers to women's election to office. These include health and legal barriers, cultural barriers, educational barriers, systemic barriers, and the role of the media.

**Health and Legal Barriers:** A country's environment must satisfy a certain hierarchy of basic needs before the

population can function as a society and before the respective genders can even entertain the idea of participating in parliament. A billion human beings go to bed hungry every night of their lives: the majority are women and children.

The rights of women as persons may not be enshrined in a country's national constitution or corresponding document. Women's moral and physical integrity may remain threatened. Delegates from India at the Cyprus conference pointed out that especially in developing countries, women are born into a state of bondage and are victims of chattel slavery, sexual exploitation and harassment, rape and violence. Bigamy, polygamy and child marriages remain on the list of crimes against women.<sup>2</sup> In countries plagued by war, political authoritarian and military regimes restrict women's open political participation.

**Cultural Barriers:** The predominant social climate of a country, for example, its religious or cultural practices, affects women's participation. Gender stereotyping is prevalent. Reproductive roles tie women to housekeeping responsibilities and keep them from entering politics until later in life than their male counterparts impeding upward political mobility. Childcare costs eliminate potential capable candidates. Women are often less assertive than men.

In old South Africa, the lack of women's rights was buried under the fight against apartheid. Most married women had a legal status similar to children – unable to sign contracts without their husbands consent – and black women were permanently under the guardianship of their fathers or spouses. In post-Apartheid South Africa, almost 1/4 of the 400 parliamentarians are women – a higher population of female representatives than in Britain or the United States – and the influential position of Speaker is held by a woman.<sup>3</sup>

**Education:** Because women have less access to education than men, their professional advancement and chance to enter institutions involved in corporate politics at an operative level are reduced. Some societies and parents see their role in giving a full quality education to women as a privilege that can be withdrawn. The impact of illiteracy on the exercising of one's political rights has been the main basis for the dismal representation of Kenyan women in national echelons of political leadership.<sup>4</sup> Women do not enter non traditional occupations; instead women enter nurturing or tertiary occupations which inhibit political life and the growth of self confidence. There is a mindset on the part of many men and women that a role in politics is unsuitable for a woman. An absence of suitable female role models in government at the local, provincial and national levels enhances the idea that politics is a "man's world" and

eliminates politics as a possible career choice for young women. There may be a sense on the part of women to feel "comfortable" – the electorate is finally sending women to parliament – things must be improving and women can relax. Not so: a number of countries currently have fewer women in parliament than during the last decade.

**Systemic Barriers:** The country's electoral system poses more hurdles to women's entry. Winning the nomination to run in an election or gaining a place on the list of candidates, depending on the electoral system, can be a major obstacle. Countries which have adopted a form of proportional representation (PR) consistently elect more women than countries with single-member plurality systems or first-past-the-post (FPTP) systems such as Canada's.

Political parties do not take the responsibility they should to promote the democratic process of equating the voice of men and women within Commonwealth legislatures. In most countries, including Kenya, political parties conduct their activities with an objective to enhance the political awareness of women, not as sectoral or national leaders, but as faithful followers. Only one of the four political parties of Kenya has a woman in its national executive committee.<sup>5</sup> In India, many women contest seats as independents, which implies that the political parties are by and large reluctant to field women as candidates.

The selection of candidates for election presents problems. Most of the world's women are without family connections or a long history with either a political party or the political system as it exists in their jurisdiction. They lack valuable experience and skills often acquired by their counterparts through involvement in local government or school boards. Women have lower membership rates in trade unions and business organizations, often influential factors in the selection and election process.

Many countries have no official body mandated to collect data on the status of women, to track the achievements of the nation's women, to speak out on women's issues, or to lobby for their rights. Nongovernmental organizations (NGO) with resources and leadership to mobilize women countrywide whose central role is to provide women with political education and training are nonexistent.

**Media:** Mainstream media leave out women in general, and the women's movement in particular, with a comprehensiveness that has disturbing implications for a democracy.

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## CPA Selection of Delegates

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The individual CPA Branch's methods of selecting delegates may inadvertently preclude the selection of women. As many ways of selecting delegates are in place as there are countries. Variables include: the small base of women from which to choose, the practice of selecting junior backbenchers and budget constraints. More often than not, the government's few women members have been elevated to Cabinet posts. A delegate, who is expected to participate, may opt out rather than be a lead-off speaker in a Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference panel. In some countries, the party in power may choose to send all the delegates from within its ranks.

Former Yukon Territory MLA Joyce Hayden described her feeling of intense alienation as a delegate to the CPA conference in Barbados in 1990: "For the first time in my life, I experienced what it was like to be a minority of a minority of a minority. I was a white person in a predominantly black organization. I was a woman in an almost exclusively male organization and, of the few women there, most were Senators. I was a rare bird - an elected white woman parliamentarian!"<sup>6</sup> Globally, the concern about the numerous barriers and impediments to the full participation of women in the political and parliamentary spheres of either their nations, or indeed even international organizations like the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, has transcended gender boundaries. It is a matter receiving close national and international attention; and is poised to remain at the top of the agenda for the struggle to dismantle all forms of discrimination against any group of humanity. Discrimination in any form can not thrive in a sound democratic system. If parliaments and the entire political spectrum of any national or international organization are to continue to claim to be democratic, the full participation of women in all forms, must not only be ensured, but it must also be seen in practice.<sup>7</sup> ♦

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1. Kathy Staudt, "Women in High Level Decision-making; a global analysis", UN paper, 1989.
2. *The Parliamentarian*, January 1994.
3. 'Men's Club' Parliament Out with Apartheid, *Gemini News Service*, GW113, London, July 25, 1994.
4. Hon. Winnifred Mwendwa, M.P., Kenya.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Joyce Hayden, "Recognition and Respect: The Transitional Role of Women in Public Life," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Spring 1991.
7. Hon. Winnifred Mwendwa, M.P., Kenya.