



“Political Party Quotas in South Africa”

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A paper presented at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)/Electoral Institute of Southern Africa (EISA)/Southern African Development Community (SADC) Parliamentary Forum Conference on

The Implementation of Quotas: African Experiences

Pretoria, South Africa, 11–12 November 2003

Background

To date, the African National Congress (ANC) is the only party in South Africa to have introduced a quotas to ensure the representation of women in politics and decision-making.¹ This system was introduced before the first general election for a democratic South Africa in 1994. The system is not legislated, but, instead, is found in the ANC's guidelines for nominations of public representatives. South African women, particularly women members of the ANC, have come a long way to achieve this. When the ANC was formed in 1912, women were not allowed under the constitution to be full members of the organization. They were regarded as auxiliary members with no voting rights.² Despite being regarded as such, under the leadership of Charlotte Maxeke, women actively participated in the ANC and in 1913 formed their own organization, the Bantu Women's League.

The Bantu Women's League articulated the concerns of women and contributed immensely in uniting African women against pass laws, rising food prices and apartheid in all of its manifestations. As a result of the activities of the Bantu Women's League, the ANC decided to permit full membership of both women and men in 1944. In 1948 the ANC Women's League was formally launched. From its founding, the League had a vision to unite South African women across the colour barrier. In 1954, the Federation of South African Women

was established and the League became its leading component. The highlights of the achievements of the Federation were the uniting of women of all races, the drawing up a Women's Charter in 1954 (a year before the adoption of the Freedom Charter), and organization of the historic mass anti-pass campaign on 9 August 9 1956 (now observed as National Women's Day).

The struggles waged by women throughout this period left an indelible mark on the ANC. The ANC conference in 1957 acknowledged their role and honoured the women with the slogan 'Malibongwe Igama Lamakhosikazi', (Let the women's name be praised) which we continue to use today. During the period between 1960 and 1990 (the time of the armed struggle, international mobilization, and mass organization in the country and the underground), women were not found wanting. They joined Umkhonto we Sizwe, became spokespersons for the ANC internationally, built and strengthened the mass democratic movement in the country and swelled the underground units of the ANC.

It was against this background of active participation that the ANC committed itself to a vision of a non-sexist, democratic, non-racial and prosperous South Africa. Gender equality and the emancipation of women found expression in ANC policy pronouncements. This commitment was evident during the period of negotiations to end of apartheid, the writing of the interim constitution and the development of the Reconstruction and Development Policies (RDP). It laid the foundation for issues of gender discrimination and their resolution to be mainstreamed into our present constitution, government policies, laws and programmes.

During the constitutional negotiations, which brought about a political settlement to the conflict in South Africa, women from across the political spectrum came together to form the Women's National Coalition (WNC). The WNC was an initiative of the ANC Women's League, and brought over 100 women's organizations and groups throughout the country together to draw up a charter covering women's rights. The WNC strengthened the position of the ANC Women's League on gender issues. It opened up the debate on the emancipation of women and gender equality in the country. It was during this period that the ANC Women's League deepened its understanding of the structural and complex nature of gender oppression, and the need to introduce extra special measures, such as affirmative action and the quota system, to address the underrepresentation of women in decision-making and politics, the economy, and all other areas from which women have historically been excluded.

The Introduction of the Quota within the ANC

In the period when the Charter for Women's Rights was being written, ANC Women's League structures engaged in several discussions regarding, *inter alia*, mechanisms to implement affirmative action policies to ensure the representation of women. It drew on the experiences of the international women's movement in particular; the experiences and achievements of women from the Scandinavian and Nordic countries also had an impact on these discussions. The setbacks suffered by women with whom we shared trenches during the struggle, namely those from Angola, Mozambique, Namibia and Zimbabwe – in regard to their participation in political decision-making – also informed our discussions. At its conference in Kimberly in April 1991, the ANC Women's League decided to push for

constitutional recognition of 30 percent female representation in ANC decision-making structures.

This decision was thus tabled at the 1991 ANC conference. An intense debate on the issue lasted for five hours, but no agreement was reached. According to our assessment, the Women's League was supported by the ANC leadership at the national level, but branch delegates from the provinces, including women, argued that they did not have a mandate to support the motion. Indeed, the issue was not debated in ANC branches prior to the conference. The debate also focussed on the issue of merit: it was argued that the election of women to decision-making positions should be based on merit.

As women, we drew lessons from this. After the conference we approached our Women's League and ANC structures to initiate debate on the representation of women and the quota system. We identified our strategic allies among the male members of the ANC, who could also articulate this issue. This new approach bore some fruit. When the guidelines for the nomination of public representatives were drawn up for the 1994 elections the debate came up again.

In the democratic elections of 1994, one-third of the public representatives elected by the ANC to the national and provincial legislatures were women. As a result, 25 percent of the members of the National Assembly were women. This was a great leap forward, as prior to 1994, South Africa had never had more than 4 percent representation of women in parliament. This placed South Africa among the top ten countries in the world in regard to the participation of women in parliament. The ANC government went ahead and appointed women as ministers and deputy ministers. In parliament, women became presiding officers, advisers, whips and committee chairpersons.

The 1999 elections witnessed the increasing presence of women in political decision-making. Unlike in 1994, when the ANC had to use the quota system to place women on its lists for the national and provincial legislatures, in 1999, the list for the national parliament did not have to be altered to achieve one-third representation – women were placed in every third position on the national list. Thus, the ANC list process resulted in the achievement of 33 percent representation of women. Women in South African politics became more visible.

From 1999 to the present, there has been significant progress in terms of the representation of women in the cabinet. Out of 27 ministers, nine are women, and of the 14 deputy ministers, eight are women. In cabinet, women are not only awarded the usual women-related portfolios, but they are also involved in almost all areas of foreign affairs, finance, housing, trade and industry, public works, public enterprise, health, minerals and energy, agriculture and land, home affairs, public service, communications, local government, justice and constitutional affairs, arts, culture, science and technology, tourism, the environment, defence and intelligence. In the national parliament, of the four presiding officers, three are women. Women are also playing a greater role in the civil service, as directors-general, deputy directors-general and chief directors.

In business and parastatal bodies, the ANC has facilitated a process under which these entities have gone out of their way to identify women to serve on various boards of directors. In the institutions supporting democracy, such as the Human Rights Commission

and the Independent Electoral Commission, women are playing an increasing role. Much still remains to be done within the public service and business, however, the government equity act guides the representation of women.

These achievements would not have been possible if we did not have a viable women's organization within the ANC itself, which over the years has fought for the realization of these goals. Since 1994, one can boldly say that the Women's League has played an increasing role. In addition to consolidating the role of women in decision-making, it has had to make sure that the outcome went beyond numbers, and to use the critical gains that it has achieved in legislatures to change the lives of women throughout the country. It has helped to ensure that parliament and government adopt laws, policies and programmes that address the needs of women, such as creating a healthcare system that is readily accessible to women and children, establishing a social development system that targets people at risk, especially single mothers, developing water and forestry community projects that benefit rural communities environmentally and financially (through reforestation and sustainable development), implementing programmes that increase women's access to small and big business and financial opportunities, and introducing several laws that deal with issues including gender equality, the choice to terminate pregnancy, marriage, divorce, maintenance, domestic violence, inheritance, housing, water and sanitation, electricity provision, and the protection of domestic and farm workers. The beneficiaries of government programmes have been the poorest of the poor, the majority of whom are women.

Endnotes

¹ The ANC is currently the ruling party in South Africa. From 1912, it led the struggle against apartheid and the struggle for the establishment of a democratic South Africa. It still regards itself as a liberation movement rather than as a classical political party.

² This was, of course, the period when in most countries, including South Africa, women did not have the right to vote. The suffragette movement was fighting for this right.