



‘Let there be a Balance’:¹ Women in African Parliaments

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It has been 25 years since the National Resistance Movement took power in Uganda and ushered in an era of women’s increased presence in African legislatures – at first in east and southern Africa and eventually beyond. In 2008, Uganda’s neighbor Rwanda became the first country in the world to have more women than men in a chamber of parliament. In mid-2012, eight African countries were among the top 30 countries worldwide in terms of women’s presence in a single or lower house of parliament. Across the continent one country after another has taken measures to increase women’s presence in the national legislature. This article provides an update on these developments within sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, the article seeks to evaluate women’s descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation in African parliaments in the last quarter-century by reviewing a growing literature. Despite the remarkable gains that have been made by women in national legislatures across the continent, Africa’s accomplishments in this arena are little known – in contrast to those from other parts of the world. This article, in surveying and synthesizing the literature, seeks also to make those accomplishments better known.

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Around the world women’s representation in national legislatures has increased dramatically since the early 1990s and nowhere has the increase been so remarkable as in sub-Saharan Africa. Uganda led the way, with its first post-conflict election for a National Resistance Council in 1989, bringing in 17.6 per cent women. Following its 2008 election, Uganda’s neighbor Rwanda became the first country in the world to have more women than men (56.3 per cent) in a national legislature. Indeed in mid-2012, eight sub-Saharan African² countries – Rwanda, Seychelles, South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, Uganda, Tanzania and Burundi – were among the top 30 worldwide, with more than 30 per cent women in a single or lower house of parliament.³ Tunisia’s late-2011 ‘parity’ election brought 26.7 per cent women into a new legislature and other countries such as Kenya and Senegal have adopted measures that should bring more women into their parliaments with the next election.⁴ In still other countries such as Ghana, Liberia and Nigeria women’s organizations struggle to enact women-friendly electoral laws.⁵ Consistent with trends around the world, those African countries at the top of the worldwide ranking all use some type of electoral gender quota in electing more women to parliament. This trend has been identified by Drude Dahlerup and Lenita Friedenvall (2005) as taking the ‘fast track’ to parliament – using an electoral gender quota to increase women’s representation significantly, often in the course of a single election – in contrast to the much slower ‘incremental approach’ that waits for political and socio-economic changes over time.

While these numbers are certainly worthy of note, many scholars have implored us to move ‘beyond numbers’.⁶ Thus, we ask: what impacts can we identify from having more women in African parliaments? Building upon the research agenda proposed by Susan



Franceshet *et al.* (2012), this article examines women's presence in African parliaments in terms of their descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation – in brief, standing for women, acting for women and role modeling women. Following Franceshet *et al.* (2012), in exploring women's descriptive representation, we examine not only the means by which more women have been elected, but also the kinds of women who have been elected. Substantive representation probes the extent to which women members of parliament (MPs) represent women's interests, paying special attention to their policy priorities and legislative accomplishments. Symbolic representation, meanwhile, addresses the ways in which women's increased presence in parliaments affects public attitudes towards women in politics as well as women's own engagement in politics. This article will do this by reviewing a burgeoning but not very well known literature on women in African parliaments. In so doing, this article also seeks to fill a void in the women's representation literature on these noteworthy recent developments in sub-Saharan Africa.

African Women MPs' Descriptive Representation

Before investigating the kinds of women who have been elected to parliaments in Africa, a discussion of the means by which more women have accessed parliaments is in order. For decades before the widespread use of electoral gender quotas, scholars of women's legislative representation investigated the extent to which a myriad of factors influenced women's access to elected office around the world, including level of socio-economic development, women's education, workforce participation and political rights, and the roles of religion, political parties and electoral systems, among others. Recent studies (Lindberg, 2004; Stockemer, 2011; Yoon, 2001; 2004) have examined some of these same factors with respect to African countries in particular.⁷ And yet Aili Mari Tripp and Alice Kang (2008) argue persuasively that in the 2000s electoral gender quotas alone offer the most explanatory power for women's increased representation around the world – in other words, those countries with a lower status for women and poorer socio-economic indicators but using some type of electoral gender quota may have a greater representation of women than the opposite, and we are now seeing this in parts of Africa.

The type of electoral gender quota used is heavily influenced by the type of electoral system a country uses (Laserud and Taphorn, 2007); typically voluntary party quotas will most likely be used with proportional representation (PR) electoral systems and reserved or special seats with plurality/majority electoral systems – with these being the two most common types of electoral gender quota in Africa. Across the continent such quotas have been designed in a variety of creative ways, with the aspiration that over time women will be accepted as viable candidates for political office and such measures will no longer be needed (Bauer, 2008).⁸ Certainly the use of gender quotas has many detractors among scholars and practitioners alike, but that is not the discussion here. In many African countries they have 'worked' in a way that is not always the case, namely, that the targets set by the quotas have been met or, often, exceeded.⁹ Moreover, in none of the most highly ranked African countries has there been any backsliding; with each election since the early 1990s as many or more women have been elected to parliament, even if by only a few percentage points more (see Table 1).

Table 1: Per Cent Women Members in Single or Lower House of Parliament in Seven African Countries before and after Political Transitions

Country	Pre-transition election	Mid-1990s election	1999/00 election	Mid-2000s election	Late-2000s election
Angola	Dec 1986 42/289 14.5%	Sept 1992 21/220 9.5%	No elections held	No elections held	Sept 2008 85/220 38.2%
Burundi	June 1993 8/81 9.9%	No elections held	No elections held	July 2005 36/118 30.5%	July 2010 34/106 30.5%
Mozambique	Not available	Oct 1994 63/250 25.2%	Dec 1999 75/250 30.0%	Dec 2004 87/250 34.8%	Oct 2009 98/250 39.2%
Rwanda	Sept 1988 12/70 17.1%	No elections held	No elections held	Sept 2003 39/80 48.8%	Sept 2008 45/80 56.3%
South Africa	Sept 1989 5/178 2.8%	April 1994 100/400 25.0%	June 1999 120/400 30.0%	April 2004 131/400 32.8%	April 2009 178/400 42.3%
Tanzania	Oct 1990 28/249 11.2%	Oct 1995 45/275 16.4%	Oct 2000 61/275 22.2%	Dec 2005 97/319 30.4%	Oct 2010 126/350 36.0%
Uganda	1980 1/126 0.7%	June 1996 50/276 18.1%	June 2001 73/305 24.6%	Feb 2006 99/332 29.8%	Feb 2011 131/375 35.0%

Source: <http://www.ipu.org>

But the real question when quotas are involved is: why does a political party or government agree to adopt them in the first place?¹⁰ This question, in the African context, has been broadly addressed in the literature (see Ballington, 2004; Bauer and Britton, 2006; Lowe-Morna, 2004; Tripp *et al.*, 2009; Waylen, 2007). In brief, political transitions, often in the wake of prolonged conflict, have provided the political opportunity structures for mobilized national women's movements, often influenced by an international women's movement (manifest, for example, in the United Nations conferences on women) to participate in the process of crafting new constitutions and drafting new laws which have provided the legal foundations and political frameworks for the institutions and mechanisms to bring more women into political office. Regional and continental bodies such as the Southern African Development Community and the African Union have also played a role (the African Union's Pan-African Parliament is a strictly 50/50 body), as has a diffusion effect through the transnational sharing of international norms or the sharing of norms across borders.¹¹

To date there seems to be a regional pattern to women's representation in African parliaments with east and southern Africa at the forefront (lending some credence to the notion of a diffusion effect) and west, central and north Africa following behind (see Table 2). In Botswana, despite its location in southern Africa, women's representation in the National Assembly has actually declined dramatically in recent years. Bauer (2010) identifies a set of factors accounting for this decline in Botswana: lack of a political transition or political opportunity structure that might have provided for the adoption of an electoral gender quota (alongside use of a first-past-the-post electoral system); the typical barriers to women's participation in politics (including lack of resources, poor presentation of women candidates in the media, exhortations that women cannot lead, etc.); insufficient effort on the part of political parties especially during the primary process; and, perhaps most importantly, the waning influence of a national women's movement. Similarly for Mauritius, Mi Yung Yoon and Sheila Bunwaree (2006) find that use of a first-past-the-post and best-loser electoral system, a low level of women's activism within political parties, coalition politics and many of the typical barriers (patriarchal culture, lack of skills and resources) have tended to sideline women candidates.¹² In mid-2012, astonishingly, Nigeria was ranked nearly last in Africa with only 6.8 per cent women in its parliament; citing some of the same factors mentioned in the Botswana and Mauritius studies, Kathambi Kinoti (2011) suggests that women candidates in Nigeria are 'invisibilized'. Jibrin Ibrahim (2004) and Kathleen Fallon (2003) have observed several factors mitigating women's political participation in general in Ghana and Nigeria including: political party actions to subvert women candidates; use of the 'indigeneity ploy'; and the suffocating role of an all-powerful national women's association or first lady's foundation. Most of the rest of this article, then, focuses on some of those African countries in which women constitute 30 per cent or more of MPs, as those are the countries for which the most scholarly literature exists and the ones from which to learn about the impacts of women's greater presence.¹³

A few books provide us with portraits of some African women MPs and reveal a range of attributes among them, though none aggregate women MPs' characteristics across the continent or even one country. In profiles of five of the first post-conflict women MPs in Uganda, Sylvia Tamale (1999) presents a mix of directly elected and 'district women' from both the ruling National Resistance Movement and the opposition. All were seasoned politicians; all were educated professionals, though their origins may well have been from peasant families in the rural areas. In her analysis of women MPs in the first and second National Assemblies elected after the transition to black majority rule in South Africa, Hannah Britton (2005) notes the way in which the characteristics of women MPs changed markedly from the first to the second. On the one hand, Britton found a striking professionalization of women MPs from the first National Assembly to the second; on the other hand, she found that the second 'generation' of women MPs was noticeably less representative of South African women overall (in terms of their socio-economic characteristics) than the first. Bauer and Britton (2006) reprint interview excerpts from four women MPs; they range from a long-time human rights activist elected on the ruling party list in Rwanda, to a finance minister who left for education

Table 2: Per Cent Women in Single or Lower House of Parliament, All African Countries, Region Added, as of 31 March 2012

<i>World rank</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Elections</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>% of women</i>
1	Rwanda	East	9 2008	80	45	56.3
5	Seychelles	Southern	9 2011	32	14	43.8
7	South Africa	Southern	4 2009	400	169	42.3
12	Mozambique	Southern	10 2009	250	98	39.2
15	Angola	Southern	9 2008	220	84	38.2
18	Tanzania	East	10 2010	350	126	36.0
19	Uganda	East	2 2011	386	135	35.0
27	Burundi	East	7 2010	105	32	30.5
32	Ethiopia	Horn	5 2010	547	152	27.8
34	Tunisia	North	10 2011	217	58	26.7
35	South Sudan	North	8 2011	332	88	26.5
41	Sudan	North	4 2010	354	87	24.6
42	Namibia	Southern	11 2009	78	19	24.4
44	Lesotho	Southern	2 2007	120	29	24.2
52	Senegal	West	6 2007	150	34	22.7
54	Malawi	Southern	5 2009	193	43	22.3
55	Mauritania	West	11 2006	95	21	22.1
56	Eritrea	Horn	2 1994	150	33	22.0
61	Cape Verde	West	2 2011	72	15	20.8
70	Mauritius	Southern	5 2010	69	13	18.8
73	São Tomé and Príncipe	Central	8 2010	55	10	18.2
74	Madagascar	Southern	10 2010	365	64	17.5
77	Morocco	North	11 2011	395	67	17.0
82	Gabon	Central	12 2011	114	18	15.8
85	Burkina Faso	West	5 2007	111	17	15.3
87	Zimbabwe	Southern	3 2008	214	32	15.0
90	Cameroon	Central	7 2007	180	25	13.9
91	Djibouti	Horn	2 2008	65	9	13.8
92	Swaziland	Southern	9 2008	66	9	13.6
93	Niger	West	1 2011	113	15	13.3
94	Sierra Leone	West	8 2007	121	16	13.2
95	Chad	Central	2 2011	188	24	12.8
97	Central African Republic	Central	1 2011	104	13	12.5
103	Zambia	Southern	9 2011	157	18	11.5
105	Togo	West	10 2007	81	9	11.1
106	Ivory Coast	West	12 2011	254	28	11.0
111	Mali	West	7 2007	147	15	10.2
112	Equatorial Guinea	West	5 2008	100	10	10.0
112	Guinea-Bissau	West	11 2008	100	10	10.0
113	Kenya	East	12 2007	224	22	9.8
114	Liberia	West	10 2011	217	58	9.6
115	DRC	Central	11 2011	492	44	8.9
120	Benin	West	4 2011	83	7	8.4
121	Ghana	West	12 2008	230	19	8.3
122	Algeria	North	5 2007	389	31	8.0
123	Botswana	Southern	10 2009	63	5	7.9
124	Gambia	West	3 2012	53	4	7.5
125	Congo	Central	6 2007	137	10	7.3
126	Somalia	Horn	8 2004	546	37	6.8
127	Nigeria	West	4 2011	352	24	6.8
138	Egypt	North	11 2011	508	10	2.0

Note: At the time this table was compiled at end March 2012, legislatures were still dissolved in Guinea and Libya. Parliamentary elections were held in Algeria in May 2012 but new results had not yet been incorporated into the table. Entries in the 'Elections' column refer to the month and year of election.

Source: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif/htm>

and later military training in exile at the age of twelve from Namibia, to an academic researcher turned opposition party MP in South Africa.

Bringing more women into parliament, or even proposing to do so, in several African countries has aroused significant opposition, often directed at women politicians and women candidates themselves. Commonly expressed charges against more women in parliaments (and the use of quotas to get them there) are that the women are 'elite' and therefore unrepresentative of the women (and men) who have elected them, or that they are 'unqualified' and as such dangerous and wasteful tokens. In the only African study that explicitly addresses this question, using Uganda as her case study, Diana O'Brien (2012) evaluates the assumptions that women elected in reserved or 'district' seats differ markedly from directly elected MPs. She finds that on the vast majority of indicators 'district' women do not differ significantly from other MPs, and on some measures they are even better prepared for office than the others.¹⁴ Tripp *et al.* (2006, p. 125) report that the evidence from their research in Africa shows that when PR electoral systems are used quotas have not led to tokenism, though there do remain concerns with reserved seats.

Indeed, reserved or special seats may create a two-tiered system of women legislators in which 'quota women' are regarded differently, perhaps even unfavorably. In a study of women's representation in the Rwandan parliament, Helle Schwartz (2004) finds that while everyone in the Chamber of Deputies was well aware of who the 'quota women' were and that they were perceived as 'grass-roots politicians', the main factor distinguishing between members, for example on the extent to which they represented women's interests, was not whether or not they were quota women but whether they were women or men. Many quota advocates and practitioners contend that reserved or special seats serve as a training ground for women who will one day run for directly elected seats; in the process, they will also help to familiarize voters with women in electoral politics. Indeed, Tanzania has recently reformed its quota for women in parliament such that women are now allowed only two five-year terms in a special seat and thereafter must run in a directly elected constituency.¹⁵ Yoon (2008, p. 77) and Anne Makinda (2011, p. 31) confirm that in Tanzania special seats are serving as 'stepping-stones' to constituency seats for women. Certainly reserved or special seats are not meant to act as a disincentive for political parties to stand women in directly elected seats (Meena, 2004).

Tamale (1999, pp. 150–1) observed that while the 'first [post-independence] generation of female MPs' hailed largely from 'political families' this has not been the case for contemporary women MPs in Uganda. In general, unlike in Asia and Latin America, family ties have not characterized women's access to political office in Africa (Adams, 2008); still it is important to stress that quotas may serve a critical role in diversifying and broadening access to elected office away from those from political or elite families.

African Women MPs' Substantive Representation

The most extensive literature to date on women in African parliaments examines the extent to which having more women in national legislatures has had a positive impact on African women. In other words, have African women legislators represented women's interests?¹⁶ In the introduction to their book, Bauer and Britton (2006) summarize ways in which more women MPs in several African countries have had a positive impact on

institutional cultures within parliaments, on legislation – laws that women MPs themselves claim to have initiated and/or strongly supported – and on civil society.¹⁷ In general, in-depth research to date has focused almost exclusively on Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda and to a lesser extent Tanzania and, thus, that is primarily the literature discussed here.

For Rwanda, Jennie Burnet (2008, pp. 376–7) finds that as early as the late 1990s the Forum of Rwandan Women Parliamentarians (FFRP) was working closely with women's organizations and government ministries to enact an 'Inheritance Law' that enabled women to inherit property and own property in their own names, enter into legal contracts and seek paid employment. Elizabeth Powley (2006) argues that women MPs from the Chamber of Deputies elected in 2003 (the first post-genocide election), despite a host of constraints, were acting as strong advocates for children – in particular by initiating pro-child legislation, challenging key government ministers and prioritizing the needs of children in the national budget. Elizabeth Powley and Elizabeth Pearson (2007) and Pearson and Powley (2008) describe the role of women MPs and their parliamentary caucus, the FFRP, in initiating and helping to pass the Gender Based Violence (GBV) Bill – as of 2008 the only successful bill to be initiated by members of parliament (rather than the executive). Efforts to pass it relied upon a cooperative rather than adversarial strategy and in the process women MPs succeeded in creating an anti-violence movement in the country. Overall, Claire Devlin and Robert Elgie (2008, p. 251) find little direct effect from women MPs on policy outputs *beyond* the GBV Bill, but they attribute striking changes in parliamentary culture (in the social climate – greater confidence and greater solidarity among women MPs and a better working relationship between women and men MPs – and more prominent cabinet appointments for women) to women's increased presence, as well as a sense that gender issues are now firmly on the political agenda. Indeed, women MPs suggested to Devlin and Elgie that a gender agenda is now 'guaranteed' by the presence of more women. Furthermore, some Rwandan women MPs have now become advocates of international feminism and would like to see their accomplishments replicated in other countries – a potential South–North diffusion of ideas.

Not surprisingly, some of the earliest studies focused on Uganda. Tamale (1999, p. 194) and Tripp (2001) both underlined the tangible results produced by women members of the Constituent Assembly in securing 'strong pro-woman provisions in the 1995 constitution'. At the same time, Tamale warned about the continuing challenges facing women legislators who sought to fulfill a mandate they saw as 'making a case for women'. In the 2000s, Anne Marie Goetz (2002), Josephine Ahikire (2004), Kari Nordstoga Hanssen (2005) and Tripp (2006) raised concerns about the way in which women MPs were elected into district seats in Uganda and the many limitations posed by the country's no-party political system. Following much criticism, the mechanism for electing women into district seats was revised so that they are now also elected by universal franchise, and a transition to a multiparty political system was effected – both in 2006.¹⁸ In the mid-2000s, Hanssen (2005) and Tripp (2006) concurred that the disappointments of the first few parliaments, with markedly more women members, had been many. By contrast, since the changes of 2006, quite a few laws important to women have been passed; in

2009 alone a Domestic Violence Bill, an Anti-Female Genital Mutilation Bill and Marriage and Divorce Bill, all with pro-women provisions, were advanced through parliament (Tripp, 2010, pp. 106–7). In their recent work, Ragnhild Muriaas and Vibeke Wang (2012) find that among the special interest groups in the Ugandan parliament, district women MPs and representatives of the disabled perform the best, on average.

Georgina Waylen (2007) has argued that South African women have made significant descriptive and substantive representation gains since the 1994 political transition. Gains have included the adoption of a new constitution with gender equality provisions, state women's machineries in the form envisaged by women, significant representation of women in the legislature and executive, and policy outcomes such as progressive laws on domestic violence and reproductive rights. Britton (2005) has documented the favorable changes to parliamentary culture that ensued beginning with the first significant infusion of women into parliament in 1994. More recently in a study of the KwaZulu-Natal provincial parliament, Suzanne Francis (2009) found that a majority of the women Members of the Provincial Parliament claimed to want to represent women's interests and felt they were effective in doing so, despite a myriad of challenges. While Gisela Geisler (2000) celebrated the early accomplishments of South African women in making the transition from participating in a liberation struggle to a government. She also identified one of the potential pitfalls of more women in political office, namely, the loss of many strong women's movement leaders to government. In a discussion of inclusionary versus transformatory approaches in South Africa, Shireen Hassim (2009) ponders which women were being represented by all of those South African women MPs; she argues that the issue is not just a question of the increased representation of women within the state but the 'increased and assertive representation of poor women within the state, as well as a strong feminist movement outside the state'.

Similar to Uganda until the changes of 2006, in Tanzania there have been concerns about the way in which women are selected into special seats in the parliament, with Ruth Shayo (2005) suggesting that only the ruling party had a clear system for nominating women to those positions. In an early assessment of the impact of more women in parliament in Tanzania, Ruth Meena (2004, p. 83) found that women MPs in the early 2000s advocated laws that addressed women's concerns in several areas, including maternity leave, access to university education, sexual and gender-based violence and land reform. More recently, Yoon (2011b) identified several positive impacts from women's increasing legislative representation including the establishment of a women's caucus that provides parliamentary skills training for women MPs, a significant increase in women MPs' contributions to parliamentary debates, a better articulation of women's interests in parliament, a more interactive parliamentary environment (between women and men) than in the past, several legal changes that benefit women (as noted above), and modest increases in women's cabinet presence. Yoon notes that these advances have been made despite ongoing challenges to women MPs including the weakness of the legislature, the limiting power of party discipline, a lack of skills on the part of women MPs and an overall lack of resources available to Tanzanian MPs. Anne Makinda (2011, pp. 33–4), herself a Tanzanian MP, concurs with Meena and Yoon, noting that women MPs in Tanzania have had a 'big impact' on the issues discussed in parliament, have successfully

pushed laws that have addressed women's needs in several areas and have monitored the national budget with women's concerns in mind.

A very clear finding of this nascent literature – that we know from decades of research on women in politics around the world – is that two factors help to enhance African women's accomplishments in parliaments. These are women's participation in cross-party women's parliamentary caucuses and working with women activists and women's organizations from civil society. Powley and Pearson (2007) and Burnet (2008) both describe the pivotal role of the FFRP – and its collaboration with women's organizations – in passing the GBV and Inheritance bills in Rwanda. Ahikire (2004) found in Uganda that the 'synergy' among women's organizations, the Ministry of Gender and the women's caucus in parliament around the drafting of the new constitution had 'an impact unrivalled in the history of Ugandan politics and the women's movement'; about a decade later Muriaas and Wang (2012) find the role of the Uganda Women's Parliamentary Organization to be critical. Geisler (2004; 2006) has argued that women's movements have been critical to the success of women politicians in several southern African countries. Indeed, the success of women in Malawi in gaining 22 per cent of seats in parliament, with a plurality/majority electoral system and no electoral gender quota, has been attributed to an active 50/50 campaign by the women's movement (Gender Links, 2010a). Melinda Adams (2008, p. 483) notes that African women's movements have organized more 50/50 campaigns than women's movements from any other region of the world.

Much of the literature cited here has recognized the potential limitations of less than democratic political systems on women's successful participation in African legislatures. Tripp (2005, p. 49) concedes that 'women's ability to participate effectively in the key institutions of governance is constrained or facilitated by the broader political framework in which they find themselves'. Indeed, all of the countries with the highest percentages of women in parliament are dominant (though not 'single') party political systems and some of those, such as Rwanda and Uganda, are increasingly authoritarian.¹⁹ Hassim (2010) has eloquently expressed a general concern about the way in which electoral gender quotas and the presence of women MPs elected on them has done very little to enhance the conditions of substantive democracy in at least a few African countries. Carey Leigh Hogg (2009) has suggested that women's unprecedented presence in Rwanda's parliament may, in part, be a way of 'building national unity by quieting dissent'. By contrast, Burnet (2008) has a more optimistic take; she argues that even gender initiatives handed down from above and implemented by authoritarian regimes can lead to transformation, and that women's increased representation in even an authoritarian government could lead to their more meaningful participation in a genuine democracy – one day – as a result of such transformations.

African Women MPs' Symbolic Representation

More recent scholarship on women in African parliaments seems to suggest that a most important impact of more women MPs may be in the realm of their symbolic representation of women's interests. And this may be of particular significance for African cases in that many symbolic representation effects take place far outside national legislatures –

which many have argued are weak in Africa, thereby raising doubts about the importance of women's greater representation in them. For Uganda, Tamale (2001, p. 220, cited in Ahikire, 2004) has noted that the presence by the early 2000s of 'such an unprecedented number of females in an institution that was traditionally dominated by men had introduced a gendered perspective to the legislative process. In addition, the increased visibility of women in leadership positions in politics was slowly changing the attitudes of Ugandan women and men towards women in politics'. She predicted that this could lead eventually to a more radical transformation of gender relations in Uganda. Tripp (2001, pp. 122–3) made a similar observation for Uganda, reporting from 1993 survey results that 'the biggest transformation that has come about in part as a result of the affirmative action politics is a new political culture regarding the acceptability of women as political leaders'.²⁰ Tripp *et al.* (2006, p. 129) made this into a still broader generalization, noting that '[o]ne of the main benefits of introducing electoral quotas has been the way an influx of women has helped influence popular perceptions of the acceptability of women being active in politics'.

In a much more thorough investigation of this question, Burnet (2011) suggests that, through women's increased presence in parliament in Rwanda, women 'may have found respect'. Burnet argues that women have reaped other benefits than legislative gains from women's increased presence in parliaments, 'including respect from family and community members, enhanced capacity to speak and be heard in public forums, greater autonomy in decision-making in the family, and increased access to education'.²¹ Hilde Coffé (2011, p. 21) suggests that at least some women MPs in Rwanda interviewed for her study value their function as role models more than their role in policy making – perhaps because the latter role is so constrained.

Yoon (2011b, p. 91) notes for Tanzania that the increase in women's representation in parliament and the 'good performance of some female politicians' has 'gradually changed the unfavourable cultural and social attitudes toward women in politics'; she quotes the executive director of the Tanzania Media Women's Association, Ananilea Nkya: 'Both men and women now know that women are capable of leading and being good politicians, and they are willing to vote for women'. In Botswana where women have historically served only as regents and not as chiefs, women chiefs such as the paramount chief of the Balete Mosadi Seboko have revealed the way in which the presence of women ministers and MPs has convinced Botswana that a woman can also serve successfully as chief.²² Finally, Tiffany Barnes and Stephanie Burchard (forthcoming), relying on Afrobarometer data from twenty countries across four waves of surveys (1999 to 2008), argue that, as women's descriptive representation increases in sub-Saharan Africa, the political engagement gender gap decreases – and not because men's engagement falls, but because women's rises. Moreover, the article finds that this impact takes effect once there are about 30 per cent women in a parliament, recalling earlier debates about 'critical mass'.

Conclusion

Since the early 1990s, countries across sub-Saharan Africa have made great strides in bringing more women into parliaments – primarily through the use of electoral gender quotas – and they continue to do so. This is part of a worldwide trend whereby women

are increasingly accessing national legislatures. A new literature that has accompanied these advances suggests that substantive and symbolic representation impacts of women's increasing presence in several African parliaments can be discerned, with symbolic representation effects being particularly significant. For several African countries, women MPs and scholars have identified legislative gains in particular in areas related to family law, gender-based violence and land, changes to institutional cultures and even increases in women's presence in executives as some of women MPs' early substantive representation impacts. Further, observers have chronicled symbolic representation effects such as changes in attitudes towards women's leadership and women's participation in politics, women's own increased engagement in politics and women's empowerment in terms of their ability to speak up and voice their concerns in everyday settings. This article has sought to make two related contributions: to summarize the accomplishments (and contemplate the remaining challenges) of women's increased parliamentary presence in Africa, and in so doing, to reveal the impressive research and scholarship that has accumulated around African women in parliaments in the last decade or so.

The studies reviewed here represent a methodological pluralism that has helped to capture the descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation of women by women MPs in Africa. As noted, in-depth studies to date have focused almost exclusively on those countries with the highest representations of women. While that research must continue it is also imperative to understand what keeps women from making greater strides in the legislative arena in other countries, particularly those in west, central and north Africa. Further, despite the political transitions of the early 1990s many African countries remain saddled with less than fully democratic political systems – marked by dominant political parties, weak oppositions and all-powerful executives. Thus it is important to elicit what women (and men) legislators are able to accomplish within these significant confines; this cursory review has suggested that even in more authoritarian states women legislators have been able to make gains. Cross-national comparisons that probe how women MPs are able to represent women in some contexts but not in others are also needed. A fruitful area of related future research would also be to understand the impact of an increasing number of women executives – heads of state and government and cabinet ministers – in a continent in which, despite these notable political advances, most women continue to lag behind men in important political and socio-economic indicators.

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Notes

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1 'We are not saying that women should take over, we are saying let there be a balance ... I think it is time for women to come about, for there to be balanced decision making and balanced governance. Let there be a balance.' Author interview with Gladys Kokorwe, then MP and minister in Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana, 3 March 2009.

2 Throughout the article I will refer to Africa, meaning sub-Saharan Africa.

- 3 <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>. The tiny island nation of Seychelles has long had high percentages of women in its parliament, without the use of an electoral gender quota or other mechanism. The discussion that follows largely excludes Seychelles which jumped to 44 per cent women in its September 2011 election.
- 4 Adopted in a favorable (67 per cent) referendum in 2010, the new constitution of Kenya reserves 30 per cent of seats in parliament for women (Anyangu-Amu, 2010). Also in 2010, the parliament of Senegal voted in favor of gender parity on party lists for future parliamentary elections. See <http://www.afrol.com/articles/24891>
- 5 The Women Legislative Caucus of Liberia and Coalition of Political Parties Women in Liberia seek to secure 30 per cent representation of women in political positions. See <http://allafrica.com/stories/printable/201104130743.html>. The director of Civic and Voter Education for the National Elections Commission of Liberia is on record as stating that electoral gender quotas must be adopted in Liberia, though this will take time (Cole, 2011). See also Amankwah Baafi (2011) on Ghana and Kinoti (2011) on Nigeria.
- 6 See, for example, Ballington and Karam (2010). The first edition was published in 1998.
- 7 For sub-Saharan Africa, Yoon (2001, p. 182) argued, based on 1990s data, that democratization overall had decreased women's representation in parliament, though the difference was 'not significant'. She suggested that democratization may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for women's increased legislative representation. Using the same 1990s data a few years later Yoon (2004) found patriarchal culture, PR electoral systems and gender quotas to have statistically significant impacts on women's legislative representation in Africa. In the same year and also using 1990s data, Lindberg (2004) found that majoritarian electoral systems discriminated against women while the impact of PR electoral systems was more ambiguous, and that repetitive electoral cycles were increasing women's percentages in parliament. More recently, Stockemer (2011) found that for African countries higher containment of corruption fosters higher percentages of women in parliament.
- 8 South Africa, Mozambique and Angola use voluntary party quotas with PR electoral systems, Tanzania and Uganda use reserved or special seats with plurality/majority electoral systems and Rwanda uses both. In Burundi if not enough women are elected they are then 'co-opted'. Some countries also have special seats for other groups. Another innovative design is used with a plurality/majority system at the local level in Lesotho. In each of three election cycles one-third of constituencies conduct women-only elections (Mhlanga *et al.*, 2009).
- 9 So, for example, in the 2011 election in Uganda, 375 seats were available; 112 of those were 'district' seats for women (a 30 per cent quota). But women received 37 per cent of seats overall; in addition to the women's seats, women won 8 per cent of directly elected seats (19 out of 237) as well as 32 per cent of seats for youth, disabled, workers and the military (8 out of 25) (http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2329_E.htm). In the 2008 election in Rwanda, 80 seats were available; 24 of those were special seats for women (a 30 per cent quota), and three for youth and the disabled. Women won 25 of the 27 special seats. In addition, women won 20 of 53 directly elected seats – via party lists (37.7 per cent). See http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2265_E.htm
- 10 This question raises the issue of 'quota discourses'. Phillips (1998) gave us a set of arguments in favor of gender parity in national legislatures; in brief: achieving justice, enhancing democracy, representing women's interests and providing role models. Early quota discourses in Africa are addressed in Ballington (2004). I have found that African women politicians embrace affirmative measures in order to level the playing field, which is seen as extremely uneven, and African women activists embrace them because they are adamant that women's interests need to be better represented and they are confident that they will be better represented by women (Bauer, 2004; 2010). It has been argued that African leaders may embrace electoral gender quotas in order to 'appear modern' or curry favor internationally, though it should be noted that some of the advanced industrial democracies lag far behind many African countries in women's legislative representation.
- 11 Interestingly, Adams (2008, pp. 479–82) suggests a similar set of factors as contributing to women's increased *executive* representation across Africa in the 2000s.
- 12 See also Gender Links (2010b) on Botswana and Yoon and Bunwaree (2008a; 2008b) on Mauritius.
- 13 As for other countries not studied in this article, Bauer chronicled women MPs' early increasing numbers in Namibia (2004) and Yoon (2011a) has written about Seychelles. Creevey (2006) has treated women's movement engagement with parliament in Senegal and Disney (2006; 2009) has examined women MPs and family law in Mozambique. Ward (2006) adds the case of Eritrea.
- 14 In my own research on women MPs in Botswana in 2009 I heard the same charges leveled repeatedly and while I did not investigate this rigorously my observations would lead me to expect the same findings in Botswana.
- 15 Author observation, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 20 July 2010; presentation by MP Janet Mbene to American Political Science Association Africa Workshop.
- 16 Here it is important to acknowledge that the concept of 'women's interests' is a contested one and that they, like women, are not monolithic; see Tamale, 1999, pp. 74–5. That said, in an African context in which so many (though not all) socio-economic indicators for women are inferior to those of men, and critical issues such as gender-based violence, family law and women's access to land are to be decided, it is suggested that women legislators may well be motivated to represent the interests, needs and concerns of other women. Interestingly, in an article on Grebo women's collective action in southeastern Liberia, Moran (1989, p. 444) argued that West African women 'simply do not view men as capable of representing them and their interests' and *vice versa*.
- 17 They also note a range of factors that continue to limit the impact of women MPs, including the power of patronage politics, enduring traditions of parliamentary politics, demands of party leaderships, inadequate implementation of new laws, and highly centralized executives.
- 18 In an earlier comparison of Uganda and South Africa, Goetz (1998, p. 241) found that, despite many obstacles, women legislators in Uganda and South Africa had taken significant steps to articulate women's interests, in particular with respect to violence against women.
- 19 In his quantitative analysis of 44 African countries, Stockemer (2011, p. 12) finds that in Africa democratic states have fewer female members of parliament than non-democratic states, although he suggests that it may be 'still too early' to say whether

- this short-term effect may be reversed in the long run. This may in part be because reserved or special seats are more likely to be used in non-democracies (Matland, 2006); at the same time they are the most certain way of bringing a designated group into a legislative body.
- 20 Survey respondents 'overwhelmingly responded that the biggest changes were related to women's participation in politics, standing for office, becoming public and government leaders, and being able to express themselves publicly to a greater degree than in the past'.
- 21 The idea that African women have been empowered to speak publicly is widespread. In Bagamoyo, Tanzania, in mid-2010, an elderly seaweed farmer, in response to a question about whether it made any difference to her to have more women in parliament, stated emphatically that 'musu musu' ('half/ half' or the 50/50 campaign) and the presence of many more vocal women in parliament meant that she too could speak up in her community in a way that she never could before. Author observation, Bagamoyo, Tanzania, 4 August 2010, visit to Bawodene women's organization by American Political Science Association Africa Workshop.
- 22 Author interview with Kgosi Mosadi Sebeko, paramount chief of the Balete, Ramotswa, Botswana, 15 June 2009. This view was corroborated by then MP and former minister Sheila Tlou, author interview, Gaborone, Botswana, 16 April 2009.

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