

IPPR Opinion No. 3, October 2001

## **WOMEN AND PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION: ASSESSING THE ARGUMENTS<sup>1</sup>**

Christiaan Keulder

**Electoral systems are mechanisms that translate votes into seats. As such, electoral systems are an important institutional link between citizens and their representatives. All electoral systems have political consequences. The very nature of any electoral system will determine the nature of these consequences. When choosing an electoral system we should be aware of the consequences associated with each of the options and we must be prepared to live with them. As no single electoral system is perfect we often have to choose between the 'lesser of two evils'. This briefing paper looks at the political consequences of two electoral systems (First-Past-The-Post and Proportional Representation) in the context of the current debate on more representation for women in local authority elections. It evaluates the merits of the various arguments and raises questions about some of the key assumptions in this debate. Although it does not argue against the general principle of producing more women as representatives, it does argue against reducing the choice of an electoral system to a gender issue only. It concludes that the existing PR system should be retained for local authority elections because this type of system contributes more substantially to the widening and deepening of democracy.**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

When the Namibian National Assembly starts its next session in September, one of the issues that will be put forward for debate will be whether the Proportional Representation (PR) electoral system used for local authority council elections should be retained or be replaced with a First-Past-The-Post system.<sup>2</sup> This is not a new debate in Namibia. In 1997, the Namibian Parliament debated the very same issue.<sup>3</sup> In a recent interview with the IPPR<sup>4</sup> the current Minister of Regional, Local Government and Housing indicated that he was going to approach Cabinet with a possible amendment to the existing legislation to retain the existing PR system. Since then, Cabinet has indicated its support for the proposal.

In the same interview, Minister Iyambo mentioned that he has been approached by organisations in the Women's Movement to retain the PR system because it would ensure that more women would be elected to local authority councils. In the Namibian Women's Manifesto drafted by Sister Namibia on behalf of the Movement in 1999, the call for a fully 'genderised' PR system is clearly spelled out. The Manifesto calls for the law to be amended so that it will compel parties to compile their lists so that 50% of their candidates are women and that men and women will be placed in alternating positions on the list.<sup>5</sup>

---

In this Briefing Paper some of the arguments and propositions around women and PR are put forward for assessment. It is not our aim to challenge the core notion that more women are needed in legislative politics: we are taking issue with some of the arguments used to support the notion. It is our position that the debate could do with some refinement. In doing so, we wish to warn against a debate that revolves around gender only. This paper employs three starting points:

- Although gender equality is an important consideration for the deepening of democracy in Namibia, it is not the only one.
- There is more to gender equality and the empowerment of women than having a larger number of women in legislative positions.
- There is more to PR than what meets the eye. With its benefits comes certain weaknesses and the entire package should be reviewed before a choice is made.

It is our view that the decision to retain or replace PR as the method for electing local authority councils should not be reduced to the gender issue only. There are other considerations that need to be debated.

## 2. WHAT'S IN A NUMBER?

Namibian gender activists call for legislative reforms that would make it compulsory for parties to include women to 50% of the positions on their lists and in a manner that would place them in alternating order on the lists. Therefore, progress in this regard is measured in the number of women that occupy legislative positions.<sup>6</sup>

In calling for the 50% quota Namibian activists have joined an international campaign calling for similar measures to be implemented by political parties around the globe. They also call for the Constitution of Namibia to be implemented. According to Article 23 of the Constitution, Parliament must enact laws:

“[...] providing directly or indirectly for the advancement of persons within Namibia who have been socially, economically or educationally disadvantaged by past discriminatory laws or practices”.<sup>7</sup>

In the Constitution women are specifically targeted as a group that have traditionally suffered special discrimination and that:

“[...] they need to be encouraged and enabled to play a **full, equal and effective** role in the political, social, economic and cultural life of the nation” [emphasis added].<sup>8</sup>

Herein lies the challenge: how will mere numbers be translated into a ‘full, equal and effective role’? There are two problems an emphasis on result-based equality. Firstly, what impact will an increase in female representation have on gender-related outputs? Secondly, how much will change and for whom? As it stands at the moment the numbers are also an indication of the extent of new entries into the political class. If the argument to retain PR aims to achieve a more equal division of the political class at the local level, we must be clear about that. Also, if something beyond that is envisioned, we should also be informed about that.

There is at least one strong argument why more women in legislative bodies will not have the impact that is often expected. Electoral systems, and PR is no exception here, appoint

---

representatives to legislative bodies and not to executive bodies. Most informed people, when asked about the real location of political power and influence, will point to executive bodies. These bodies, whether they are cabinet at national level or management committees at sub-national level, are tasked with the real powers to design policy and oversee the effective implementation thereof. In the case of the Namibian National Assembly, members of the Executive constitute an effective numerical majority in the House, meaning that ordinary MP's cannot veto any Cabinet decision by simply voting against it. To date scholars have yet to prove a causal link between the number of women in the legislature and the number of women in executive positions. Until such time, we cannot use the number of women in legislatures as an accurate indication of the real political empowerment of women.

A second argument holds that number per se are merely an indication of the extent of new entries into the political class. It does not tell one what interests those new entrants represent. It would be politically naïve to assume that all women inherently choose to represent women's or at least gender interests.<sup>9</sup> Women, like men, represent parties and political parties represent particular interests. They are expected to serve and uphold the policies and programmes of their parties. It cannot be taken for granted that women will want to or be allowed to serve interests that are outside the parameters that their parties have set. Thus: if we count the number of women in legislatures, what do we count? The extent to which women have joined the political class, or the progress made on such issues as gender-equality and gender-empowerment? It is easy to measure women as members of the political class – you simply count women in all legislative positions. It is more difficult to use a number to measure the extent to which women's causes have been advanced. The issue is clear: we cannot simply use the number of women in legislative positions to measure progress on gender equality and empowerment. Even if we assume that an increase in numbers is a necessary first step, we are still not clear about the outcomes. How and when will the increase in numbers begin to have an impact?

### **3. PRIMORDIALISM**

PR alone cannot address these two problems highlighted above. If PR is to be retained to bring more women into the political class it should be made clear that this, and nothing more, is the objective of the proposed institutional reform. Writing on women and the electoral system in South Africa, Julie Oyegun raises an important question:

“Can we assume that, once given the opportunity to vote, women will vote for women or should we encourage women to vote for women and in each case why?”<sup>10</sup>

With this question she raises the important issue of linking women as representatives with women as voters. At least one of the arguments against single-member, majoritarian systems is based on the assumption that men will not vote for female candidates. Hence, women will not obtain a fair chance to be elected, as the dominant male-driven political culture will work against them. Oyegun takes us one step further by asking whether or not women when given a chance to vote for female representatives will indeed do so and if this is indeed the case, why? She warns against primordialism in this regard:

“As people concerned with the gender dimensions of electoral and, indeed, all other processes, it might be useful for us to interrogate assumptions that women should and will cast their ballot for women candidates, i.e. that women of all types will exercise their franchise to elect ‘other’



---

women with whom they may be unable to identify beyond their common gender. The essential of such assumptions is glaring and reduces women to their gender and nothing else.”<sup>11</sup>

If her caution is applied consistently, it means that if we cannot merely assume that women will be compelled by their gender to vote for female candidates, we should not do the same with men. In short we cannot reduce female and male voters to their genders only.<sup>12</sup> Voting behaviour is complex and should be studied in its complexity before any conclusions are reached about the way men and women will behave toward female representatives. We would caution against arguments that are based on primordial assumptions in building a case for PR.

Exit poll surveys conducted since 1992 in Namibia suggest that voters are in general not against voting for women candidates.

- In 1992, 78% of voters said that they would have no difficulty in voting for a women candidate. The differences in opinion for male and female voters were marginal.<sup>13</sup>
- In the 1998 Local Authority Elections survey some 81% of voters felt either positive or very positive about women candidates and 73% of voters felt positive or very positive about having more women candidates. Women did, however, score slightly higher than men on both accounts.<sup>14</sup>
- In the 1999 Presidential and National Assembly Elections survey, some 84% of voters felt either positive or very positive about women as candidates. Only one-in-every-five voters felt that women candidates would not be as capable as men. Some 69% of voters felt that more women are needed in Parliament. Men and women felt almost equally strong about more women as candidates (80.3% and 89.1%) and more men than women felt that women are not as capable as men (24.4% and 16.6%). Substantially more women (80.3%) than men (58.9%) wanted more women in Parliament.<sup>15</sup>

Although these statistics do not explore gender-related perceptions to their full conclusions, they do suggest that the majority of Namibian voters would not have a problem voting for women candidates (provided that these women are from the ‘right’ party). With this we are not suggesting that women candidates will not face problems when contesting elections, but we argue that the assumption that women candidates will fail to attract substantial support because of their gender, is perhaps an over-simplified and not entirely accurate assumption.

Some international experiences seem to point in the same direction. When the National Women’s Political Caucus (NWPC) in the USA did a comprehensive study of the success of men and women candidates (for the period 1986-1992 and under a FPTP system) they found that a candidate’s sex did not affect his or her chances of winning general elections.<sup>16</sup> What matters is incumbency: Incumbents are more likely to win elections than challengers and open seat candidates and since most incumbents are men, men are more likely to win. Based on these findings Newman concludes that:

“[...] when comparing men running as incumbents to women running as incumbents, men running for open seats to women running for open seats and men running as challengers to women running as challengers, men had no advantage over women – women won as high a percentage of their races as men.”<sup>17</sup>

The performance of women candidates in Malta further supports the argument. Under the Single-Transferable-Vote system (this is a variant of PR), women appear to do as well as men in winning

---

their elections. Lane's study also lists incumbency as an important factor accounting for electoral success. He argues:

“ ... figures indicate that once on the ballot, women as a group – over time and on average – had just about the same chance of being elected as their male counterparts”<sup>18</sup>

From the above it seems as if the real problem is not discriminatory voting against women candidates but rather 1) that not enough women contest elections (and there may be a variety of reasons for this) and 2) that there are not enough women as incumbents (which in turn is related to the fact that there are not enough women candidates). These findings raise sufficient doubt about using primordial arguments to build a case for PR and furthermore suggest that electoral systems have little influence over the success rates for women candidates. The real challenge, so it seems, is to get more women to run as candidates.

#### 4. WHAT PR CAN AND CANNOT DO

Electoral systems are mechanisms to translate votes into seats. As such, they appoint representatives to legislative bodies. Electoral systems play no part in the composition of executive bodies. PR systems are often recommended on the basis that they provide for more fairly constituted legislatures because membership is determined by the principle of proportionality. Parties' share of seats is determined by their vote-share.

“[PR's]...advantages include fairness to minor parties and more accurate representation of social groupings within the electorate.”<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the strongest argument in favour of PR and a more equal distribution of male and female representation stems from the fact that with party lists (and all PR systems use some form of party list) the nomination of candidates can be manipulated. For PR to appoint more women to legislatures *it has to be combined* with provisions for gender quotas.<sup>20</sup>

PR is the preferred system for most institutional engineers and gender activists are not alone in this regard. There is a danger, however, that not enough attention is paid to the negative aspects of PR when the call for greater equality is made. This certainly is the case with the debate in Namibia and it is the issue we wish to address with this paper. What can we expect under PR? What follows is a short summary of the advantages and disadvantages of PR as they pertain to gender issues.

- PR cannot appoint more women to executive positions. No electoral system can do that. Whether or not women appear in equal numbers and equal positions on the party list is no guarantee that they will be appointed (in equal numbers or otherwise) to executive positions (management councils or Cabinet). This Aucoin and Smith (1997) maintain, goes against the common understanding that PR is associated with more equal representation.
- PR will only appoint more women to legislative positions if it is combined with some form of gender quota for lists.
- PR cannot translate gender-inspired votes into representation for women or pro-gender candidates. As long as lists are used, those voters that specifically target women or pro-gender candidates will see their votes being 'wasted' as they will be counted for men (or any unwanted candidate) on the list as well. Under pure PR the voter has a limited choice.



---

Either vote for the entire list or do not vote at all. Voters will not be able to target women specifically for their vote.

- PR will not ensure that the best or most capable women (or men) get elected. PR cannot protect women from the inner workings of political parties. In fact, one could argue that PR is more likely to produce party minions than strong, independently minded candidates. This is true for men, and it will also be true for women.
- PR cannot ensure that gender and women's issues will be put high up on the election agenda. It is because PR is such a party-centred system. Candidates are picked to fit the party agenda and once elected they occupy seats allocated to the party and not themselves.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, where gender is put on the agenda is up to the party and not the candidates or representatives. Whatever influence candidates will have will depend on the amount of space allowed for by the party.
- PR will not provide women with clear constituencies or defined geo-political areas of influence. Under PR, women (like men) have no clear basis of support as all votes are pooled for the party. This means that no representative can lay claim to representing a specific constituency or section of a constituency or that they have been appointed to represent any specific interests. PR by its very nature was not designed to foster close constituency-representative contact. It is the system of elites and elite interaction.

If we look at the list provided above it is clear that PR will produce a mixed bag of gender-goods. On the one hand, PR (with quotas) will produce more women in legislative positions. On the other, it will produce female (and male) representatives with limited powers and influence over policy agendas and programmes. Also, PR will not bring equal representation for women in executive positions. In the words of one Spanish MP:

“Quotas are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they oblige men to think about including women in decision-making, since men must create spaces for women. On the other hand, since it is men who are opening the spaces, they will seek out women who they will be able to manage, women who will more easily accept the hegemony of men”.<sup>22</sup>

## **5. ON DELEGATES AND REPRESENTATIVES**

Edmund Burke distinguished between delegates and representatives based on the interests elected officials should represent and the role they should play in the governing of their country. In his now famous speech to the Bristol electorate delivered on 3 November 1774, he argued:

“Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests; which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate against other agents and advocates; but parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole; where, not local purposes, not local prejudices, ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole”.<sup>23</sup>

To Burke delegates are slaves of the constituencies whereas representatives could think and act independently. Thus, unlike representatives, delegates merely present issues on behalf of and work for their constituencies. In more modern times this is the politics of pork barrelling.<sup>24</sup> Burke highlights a common problem for elected officials – the problem of juggling and reconciling sometimes divergent and conflicting interests.



---

It has to be said that delegates are more likely to be produced by single-member or FPTP electoral systems. This is because candidates depend on their constituencies for re-election. Members elected under PR have no clear home-constituencies and they are, hence, not subject to these stringent pressures from below. But they are, for reasons mentioned above, subject to stringent pressures from above. For PR members the efforts to secure re-election are directed upward to the party and those inside the party that are responsible for the compilation of the lists. If pork barrelling is the cancer of FPTP systems, patronage is the cancer of PR.

Women will not be spared the restrictive forces of party patronage and discipline once they enter legislatures. The mechanisms of social control (such as party loyalty) are currently still firmly under the control of men. Women will be expected, like less senior men, to tow the line and it is quite conceivable that conflict can arise between gender issues and the general policies devised by the party. Under PR, elected members have no constituencies to fall back on. They are vulnerable because they do not 'own' the seat they're sitting in. The point is that gender issues might not appear more on the legislative agenda despite the fact that more women are occupying legislative positions.

This raises new questions on the quality of representation produced by PR systems. For legislatures to become less hostile environments for women, the composition of party leadership must become gender-balanced. PR cannot do this. It can only appoint women to legislatures. PR plays no part in how party leadership is compiled and since party leadership is such a key factor in the workings of PR, getting more women on lists is no guarantee that they would escape the restrictive workings of patriarchal party structures. One possible outcome of this is that women will find it difficult to align across the party divides (assuming that they would want to). At least one woman MP in the Namibian National Assembly has spoken out on this:

“Party loyalties keep women from uniting around the issues of concern to women of Namibia who are, after all, the majority of our population”.<sup>25</sup>

PR will in no way ensure that women will be effective representatives once in legislative structures. Less-senior male counterparts (backbenchers) have complained about this for long. Women will do well to take note of this and learn from this experience. PR is no guarantee that women will be effective or even influential representatives (as opposed to delegates) in legislatures.

In the final instance, the current debate focuses primarily on the input side of politics. The call is for more women in legislative positions. What is not mentioned, however, is what should happen thereafter? Instead of coupling targets for the number of women in legislative positions with some measure of gender-sensitive policies, the current call is merely for larger numbers. This paints an incomplete picture of the nature of politics and the location of power and influence. As it stands, the call for more women in local authority councils tells us nothing about what we should expect as a result of that. Hence, we have nothing to measure the success of the proposed institutional reform against (beyond the numbers that is). We need to have more to measure the outcome of the proposed institutional reform against. After some years of gender quotas and PR what has changed for women (and men) in Namibia's local authority areas?

---

## 6. ARE WE NOT FORGETTING SOMEONE?

Namibia is a country of political minorities. Various types of (political) minorities exist. They can be defined on basis of ethnic group, race, gender, status as people with disabilities, religion, socio-economic status and sexual orientation to name just a few.

The argument that PR should be retained to ensure that women as a political minority obtain their 'fair share' of political representation raises the question as to why only women? Why not be consistent and call for a more fair representation of all political minorities? One would be able to argue, for example, that obvious ethnic minorities such as the San and the Ovahimba can do with some or more representation. So would people with disabilities want to enjoy inclusion on party-lists to ensure more disabled-friendly policies.

There are several difficult questions to consider. Firstly, who qualifies for affirmative action as specified by the Constitution (i.e. what determines their special status)? Secondly, who decides on their special status? Women's status as a political minority (despite the fact that they are a numerical majority in some cases) has become a global issue. This means that the issue attracts support from a wide range of organisations (international and local) and that campaigns have access to substantial resources and considerable organisational energy and skill (both local and international). But what about other political minorities?

Ethnicity, for example, still accounts today for most of the world's destructive wars. Yet the protection of ethnic minorities by means of legislative quotas has not attracted the same amount of organisational and financial resources as the women's movement. This is perhaps partly because there are so many minority groups, and aside of the status as minorities they have little else in common. Their plight is often very localised and no ethnic minority has a presence that spans the globe. As a result, the plight of many ethnic minorities (especially those whose physical existence are not threatened) has remained local. Thus, there is no San movement for greater San representation in legislatures; international organisations do not collect statistics to monitor the progress of the San (hence no San Empowerment Index), nor are government pressured into more San-sensitive policies. There are, locally and internationally, many more examples to this effect.

The argument that special representation is reserved for groups (of a special kind) carries with it the proverbial Pandora's box. PR as an electoral system was designed to overcome politically important cleavages in divided societies. But it was based on the assumption that political parties are formed along the lines of these major cleavages. Thus, if gender is such a big divide political parties are supposed to be formed along the lines of gender. Then parties for men and women would contest and each would be proportionally represented. PR was not designed to deal with cleavages within parties (as is the case currently with gender). The danger of calling for PR to redress within party cleavages (be they gender, ethnicity or any other kind) is that there will not be an end to the number of claims put forward. For example, ethnic minorities might call for special treatment on party-lists, as women are doing now and the same with people with disabilities and gay and lesbian people. There seems to be little basis for refusing one group and allowing the privilege to another as the constitution refers to all that have suffered from past inequalities.

On a less philosophical and more practical level, the current call for PR to be retained for local authority elections targets the plight of urban women only. The reasons for this are not clear. Does this mean that rural women are not entitled to more fair representation? In line with the current



---

campaign should we not consider changing the Constitution to allow for regional councils to be elected by means of PR? As it is, rural women, despite being the numerical majority, will remain under-represented in their legislatures and as one of the more marginalised groups in Namibia an explanation is required.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the women's movement will clarify this issue at some point.

## 7. PR AND CONSOLIDATION OF DEMOCRACY

In an often-cited study, Lijphart (1999:275) calls PR systems 'kinder, gentler democracies'. PR systems are 'kinder and gentler on four accounts: 1) they are more generous with their aid to other nations; 2) they put fewer people in prison and are less likely to implement death penalties; 3) they are more likely to be welfare states; and 4) they have a better record with regard to protection of the environment. But does this mean that having a PR system will automatically bring these benefits? It is, unfortunately, unlikely that this will be the case in developing democracies with a small resource base such as Namibia. Furthermore, Lijphart seems to be describing specific features for some countries employing PR without necessarily exploring the causal links between PR and these features.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the result might change significantly if new democracies with less economic resources are added to his sample.

In young democracies such as Namibia, the key issue that has to be debated is what kind of electoral system will contribute most to the consolidation of democracy. If consolidation is taken to mean the widening and deepening of democracy, electoral systems have to be evaluated for their contributions to both these processes (widening and deepening). To increase the number of women in representative positions is an important aspect of consolidation, but it is not necessary, nor sufficient to secure full consolidation.<sup>28</sup>

Pure PR systems contribute to the consolidation of democracy in the following ways:

- It promotes multi-partism (as opposed to bi-partism) because smaller parties do win representation. PR systems usually have low effective thresholds, which means that small parties do win legislative seats. This makes PR systems more inclusive than majoritarian or plurality systems. PR is also better at providing representation for women and minorities.
- PR translates votes into seats in a proportional manner, which means that fabricated majorities do not exist. Seats are allocated in a strict proportional manner and all parties with sufficient support gain representation and thus it avoids the disproportionality of a winner-takes-all system. Under PR all are winners.
- PR encourages higher levels of participation especially during elections because no or very few votes are wasted. Supporters of smaller parties are more or less certain that they have a fair chance of being represented, so they are more likely to vote. This is the opposite of a plurality system where only one winner is appointed and where supporters of small parties abstain from voting knowing well in advance that they will not gain representation.
- Electoral campaigns under PR are less costly than under FPTP, simply because it can be based on a singular party-driven campaign. Unlike plurality campaigns it does not require multiple candidate-driven campaigns in a large number of constituencies. This implies that parties or candidates that wish to contest elections do not have to be well endowed with resources.
- PR systems promote coalitions, which in turn, promote moderation, policy-trade-offs and better cooperation between parties.<sup>29</sup>

- 
- PR systems, because of the fact that they use multi-member, single constituencies, prevent the manipulation of constituency boundaries to fabricate majorities (a practise known as 'gerrymandering').

Pure PR systems hamper the consolidation of democracy in the following ways:

- It promotes elite politics over constituency politics and causes a (sometimes) large divide between representatives and represented. The logic of PR means that elections are more likely to be contested along party lines than issue divides. This takes the attention away from individual candidates and specific local issues and promotes party patronage and stringent party discipline. This creates a situation where the quality and capability of representation is submerged under partisanship and loyalty.
- PR freezes in and perpetuates the socio-political cleavages in a society. If a society is divided along racial, ethnic or religious lines for example, and political parties are constituted along these lines, it means that there are few incentives to bridge these gaps on a 'permanent' basis. Ethnic parties will remain ethnic parties; racial parties will remain racial parties, and so on. PR does not necessarily encourage parties to become 'catch-all' parties. PR systems also strengthen and perpetuate party loyalty and reduce the possibility of issue voting.
- PR systems reduce chances for constituency-representative contact. This, could be argued, not only promotes elitist politics but also weakens accountability.
- PR reduces representatives' autonomy *vis-à-vis* their parties and hence, produce weak representatives. Elected representatives do not 'own' their seats under PR, their parties do, and party discipline prevents representatives from supporting issues that conflict with the party line. Thus floor-crossings do not happen and cross-party voting on major issues is unlikely to occur. Furthermore, representatives are unlikely to undertake any special activities to seek re-election other than what is perceived to bring benefit to the party and/or its patron(s).
- Where PR is used in combination with constituency-based systems and where PR accounts for the most prominent level of elections (the national level), it might over-ride the perceived benefits of the constituency-based system simply because PR campaigns are easier and less costly than constituency-based campaigns. This especially applies to Namibia where two of the three systems in use are of the PR type. Parties are unlikely to change their top-down centre-driven campaign strategies simply because it is a different kind of electoral system. Thus the political strategies and culture that are cultivated under PR systems will be used to drive all elections and in doing so will undermine the perceived benefits of a constituency-based system.<sup>30</sup>

## 8. THE WAY FORWARD

In this paper we have argued that there is more to the issue of women's representation than the electoral system. We have also argued that the debate on the most appropriate electoral system for Namibia should not be reduced to a gender issue only. The debate should be about the consolidation of democracy, of which women's representation is only one component. We warned against arguments that ignore the complexity of the problem and reduce the debate to the electoral system only. We concur with Lijphart's conclusion in his testimony before the California State Legislature<sup>31</sup>:

---

“[...] the advantages and disadvantages of PR and plurality should not be exaggerated, as the proponents of the two alternatives tend to do. In my opinion the relative merits are matters of degree, not absolute differences”

The second part of the argument suggested that there is more to the issue of gender equality in politics than getting more women elected. We drew attention to the issues of getting more women in executive positions and promoting gender sensitive policies and programmes because we believe that the current campaign does not pay enough attention to the output side of politics.

In the last part of the argument, we highlighted some of the shortcomings of the PR system and showed that the system will impose constraints on the performance of women (and men) candidates. We have also highlighted what we believe to be the strengths of the PR system and its overall impact on the consolidation of democracy in Namibia.

Based on the arguments and evidence presented here we conclude that PR is good for democracy. Hence, we propose the following recommendations:

1. That the PR list system with a Hare quota and Largest Remainders be retained but modified for local authority elections in Namibia. We are convinced that PR is most fair in its allocation of seats and that it promotes multi-partism. We believe these two consequences is most crucial for the consolidation of democracy in Namibia. An additional benefit is that this system will pave the way for more equal representation for women and other minorities.
2. We recommend that the PR system should be modified to allow for **open** lists (as opposed to the closed lists used currently), and that formal procedures be devised and implemented (such as preliminary elections among party members) to appoint candidates to the lists. Open lists, because party supporters determine who gets on the list and where, will improve accountability to voters and will allow voters more choices with regard to their candidates. Open-lists and quotas, we believe are not incompatible and can be implemented simultaneously.
3. Intense and widespread gender campaigns and programmes are necessary to mobilise more women into politics. The issue is not only to get more women into the political class but also to get women into politics in general. More women should become candidates, as we believe that they will be elected. The issue of women in political life is very complex and cannot and should not be reduced to a specific electoral system. Systematic research programmes on women and politics should precede this campaign. These programmes should not only investigate women's overall relations with state, policy and public life, but also investigate whether or not these experiences are an extension of their domestic conditions and experiences. This way activists and researchers will be able to determine the conditions and relations that prevent women from assuming their rightful place in political and public life and target these obstacles with appropriate strategies for change.
4. The debate and campaign on women in legislatures should be expanded to include rural women. There is no acceptable reason for it to be confined to a) urban areas and b) local authority elections. The issue of minority accommodation should be addressed as well, and a review of the Namibian electoral system is necessary. This review should pay attention to the political consequences of the systems in use and how they affect the quality of representation and democracy in this country.

In this paper we have used various experiences and arguments to show that the type of electoral system as independent variable explaining the position of women in political life has real



---

limitations. But we have not provided any real alternatives. This is the challenge for future research.

## 9. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In this paper we have argued that numbers should not be treated as a reliable measure of the political empowerment of women. But does this mean that numbers are not important at all? We have, at this point, no data to analyse the impact of having larger number of women in legislative positions. If we accept that larger numbers of women in legislative position is a first step, we need to establish the outcomes. The argument that numbers are not sufficient but necessary needs to be assessed. This would require an analysis of policy outcomes, and more specifically policy outcomes with regard to gender issues. Only then would we begin to measure the impact of having more women in legislative positions.

A second issue that requires further analysis deals with women's 'pathways' into political and public life. We do not know enough about the gender dimensions of political socialisation, the extent to which gender relations and intimate partner relations influence women's views and attitudes on political and public life. It is not enough to assume or suspect - the obstacles need to be identified, studied and systematically addressed. This of course is not to say that all should be put on hold until such time as we understand things better. At least some of the research we incorporated here suggests that the real problem might be getting women to run as candidates and not the type of electoral system *per se*. Thus gender research and activist programmes should be undertaken to identify and open up pathways for women into political and public life. In short, at this point we do not know whether or not more women in legislative positions contribute to a more accessible route to political and public life for women in general.

The third issue that warrants further investigation is that of an alternative electoral system. One potentially exciting prospect is that of the mixed-system. A mixed-system contains elements of both PR and FPTP as a number of representatives are elected from party lists and the remainder as individual candidates. Although this system is perhaps not suitable for local authority elections in Namibia, its applicability for national and regional elections should be investigated.

---

<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank Dianne Hubbard (Co-ordinator of the Gender Research and Advocacy Project at the Legal Assistance Centre) for her comments on an early draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> In the Namibian debate the FPTP system is commonly referred to as 'the Ward system'. The more technical term is single-member plurality systems because the system appoints only the candidate with most votes as the winner. Another variety of this type of electoral system is the majoritarian system. Here the winner has to obtain a majority vote (50%+1) to be appointed. Like plurality systems, majoritarian systems appoint only one winner per constituency.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the 1997 debate see Tjihero, Namalambo and Hubbard (1998)

<sup>4</sup> See IPPR Interview No. 3, August 2001

<sup>5</sup> This is what is commonly referred to as a "zebra-list".

<sup>6</sup> See for example Tjihero, Namalambo and Hubbard (1998) and Hubbard (2001)

<sup>7</sup> The Constitution of the Republic of Namibia Article 23 (2)

<sup>8</sup> The Constitution of the Republic of Namibia Article 23 (3)

<sup>9</sup> In Australia for example the One Nation Party and the Democratic Party have women as leaders. Both Pauline Hanson and Cheryl Kernot are Members of Parliament. Hanson's One Nation Party, however, does not have any specific gender-related policies or programme. The Democratic Party on the other hand proposes far more integrative policies in regard. In fact, Hanson's extreme nationalism can be seen as a threat to women from immigrant communities. Does this mean we have to consider both of them as indications of the empowerment of women? Another example is the case of Italy where right wing women opposed the



---

introduction of quotas for women on the basis that women do not need to be protected from the workings of politics. (see Guadagnini n.d.)

<sup>10</sup> Oyegun (n.d. p.6)

<sup>11</sup> Oyegun (n.d. p.6)

<sup>12</sup> In the voting behaviour literature, primordial arguments have become closely associated with the ‘elections-as-ethnic-census’ argument. This argument holds that in ethnically divided societies, voters vote to register their ethnic identities. Cross ethnic voting does not exist and voters are compelled by their ethnic identity to vote for only candidates from their own ethnic group. As a result elections are events to count membership to ethnic groups and to be interpreted as an ethnic-census.

<sup>13</sup> Pendleton et.al. (1993:20)

<sup>14</sup> Local Authority 1998 Dataset, IPPR: Windhoek

<sup>15</sup> Presidential and National Assembly Dataset, IPPR: Windhoek

<sup>16</sup> Newman (1995:1)

<sup>17</sup> Newman (1995:1)

<sup>18</sup> Lane (1995:6)

<sup>19</sup> Aucoin and Smith (1997). For more detailed and sophisticated analysis of the benefits of PR see Lijphart (1999) and Reynolds (1999). For a debate on PR and majoritarian systems see Sisk and Reynolds (1998). For a detailed overview of electoral systems see Reynolds and Reily et. al. (1997).

<sup>20</sup> Quotas for women entail that women must constitute a certain number or percentage members of a body or a party list (IDEA [www.idea.int/women/parl/ch4b.htm](http://www.idea.int/women/parl/ch4b.htm))

<sup>21</sup> Under PR seats are allocated to parties and not to individual candidates. Therefore, parties are in a position to remove members from their seats with relative ease and fill the seats with another candidate of the party’s choice. This means that ‘rogue candidates’ can be removed from office by a simple expulsion from the party. Under FPTP this cannot happen because seat belongs to the individual candidate and not the party. Even if a ‘rogue candidate’ is expelled from the party he or she remains part of the elected body (could be as an independent).

<sup>22</sup> See IDEA (ibid: p.3)

<sup>23</sup> At <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch13s7.html>

<sup>24</sup> “Pork Barrelling” is a notion quite commonly used in the USA to describe the practise of a representative inserting home-constituency projects with no real national value into national budgets with the sole purpose of promoting chances for re-election.

<sup>25</sup> Rosa Namises (MP) in *Sister Namibia*, Vol. 13 (2) 2001. She also mentions the dormant state of the Women’s Caucus and women MP’s unwillingness to respond to efforts to revive it and make it more effective.

<sup>26</sup> The Namibian Women’s Manifesto omits the issue of fair representation of rural women altogether.

<sup>27</sup> He fails, for example, to provide an argument that conclusively proves that PR is the cause of less people in prisons or less executions. Namibia is a case in point. It employs a PR system and does not execute any offenders anymore as the death penalty is prohibited by the constitution. The relationship between the electoral system and the number of executions thus exist but is at best spurious, as the decline in the number of executions since Independence cannot be ascribed to changing the electoral system to PR. The real cause of the decline in the number of executions is to be found in the Constitution not the electoral system.

<sup>28</sup> This point is obvious yet often neglected in the current debate. Three of the world’s oldest democracies, the USA, United Kingdom and France have among the lowest rates of women representation in legislatures (11%, 9% and 6% for the period 1992-1994 respectively). Yet no one would question the degree to which democracy is consolidated in these countries.

<sup>29</sup> This point is not often appreciated enough. The recent by-election in Rehoboth is a good illustration of the point. No party on its own achieved a large enough majority in the legislature to control the Council on its own. This promoted the CoD and DTA/RRA Alliance to form a coalition to secure a legislative majority. However, this ruling coalition could not constitute the executive body (the Management Council) on its own and they were forced to include one SWAPO member. This means that parties were forced to make trade-offs and that all voters are represented not only in the legislative body, but also in the executive. The fact that the CoD/DTA/RRA coalition holds two of the three executive positions means that policy deadlocks are unlikely to occur.

<sup>30</sup> We have seen in past elections how dominant central and senior party officials were during local and regional council elections and how these elections were fought on issues of party policies. In the face of it all local candidates and issue have all but disappeared. Exit polls done by us show clearly that voters do not approach local and regional elections any differently from national elections. There are no differences in the extent to which voters felt informed, their knowledge of parties and candidates, nor in the issues that motivated them to cast a vote. Also, their expectations of the outcomes remained constant across all three levels (Keulder 1998, 1999,2000).

<sup>31</sup> Lijphart (n.d.: 1)



---

## References

- Aucoin P and J Smith, 1997, Proportional Representation: Misrepresenting Equality, Options Politiques, November
- Frank L, 1999, Women Challenge “Government by Men for Men” with the Namibian Women’s Manifesto, Sister Namibia, November/December (also at: <http://www.wgnrr.org/A-Namibia>)
- Guadagnini M, n.d. The Debate on Women’s Quotas in Italian Electoral Legislation, Swiss Political Science Review, [http://www.ib.ethz.ch/spsr/debates/debat\\_egal/art-2-2.htm](http://www.ib.ethz.ch/spsr/debates/debat_egal/art-2-2.htm)
- Hubbard D, 2001, 50/50: Options for Namibia, unpublished paper, Legal Assistance Centre: Windhoek
- IDEA, n.d. Women in Politics: Beyond Numbers, <http://idea.int/women/parl.htm>
- Iyambo N, 2001, IPPR Interview No. 3, August 2001, Windhoek
- Keulder C, 1998, Voting behaviour in Namibia Vol. I – Local Authority Elections 1998, Friedrich Ebert Foundation: Windhoek
- Keulder C, 1999, Voting behaviour in Namibia Vol. II – Regional Council Elections 1998, Friedrich Ebert Foundation: Windhoek
- Keulder C, 2000, Voting behaviour in Namibia Vol. III – National Assembly Elections 1999, Friedrich Ebert Foundation: Windhoek
- Lane J, 1995, The Election of Women under Proportional Representation: The Case of Malta, <http://www.maltadata.com/m-women.htm>
- Lijphart A, n.d. PR vs. Single-Member Districts in States, Testimony before the California State Legislature, <http://mtholyoke.edu/acad/polit/damy/articles/lijphart.htm>
- Lijphart A, 1999, Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and performance in Thirsty-Six Countries, Yale University Press: Yale
- Newman J, 1995, Women Candidates Can Win ... When They Run, <http://www.fairvote.org/reports/1995/chap6/newman>
- Oyegun J, n.d., Voting and the Electoral System: Voting and Candidacy, <http://www2.womensnet.org.za/gov/systems.htm>
- Republic of Namibia, 1990, The Constitution of the Republic of Namibia, Government Printer: Windhoek



---

Pendelton W, (et.al.) 1993, A Study of Voting Behaviour in the 1992 Namibian Regional and Local Government Elections Plus Election Statistics, University of Namibia: Windhoek

Reynolds A and B Reily et.al eds., 1997, The International IDEA Handbook of Electoral Design, International IDEA: Stockholm

Reynolds A, 1999, Electoral Systems and Democratisation in Southern Africa, Oxford University Press: Oxford

Sisk T and A Reynolds, 1998, Elections and Conflict Management in Africa, United States Institute of Peace Press: Washington

Sister Namibia, 1999, Words into Action: The Namibian Women's Manifesto, Windhoek

Sister Namibia, 2001, Women Making their Marks on Politics, March: Windhoek

Sister Namibia, 2001, A Passion for Politics: Parliamentarian and Women's Activist Rosa Namises Speaks her Mind, April/May: Windhoek

Sister Namibia, 1999, Words into Action: The Namibian Women's Manifesto, Windhoek

Tjihero K, D Namalambo and D Hubbard, 1998, Affirmative Action for Women in Local Government in Namibia, Legal Assistance Centre: Windhoek

The aim of the IPPR Opinion series is to raise questions, stimulate debate and put across views on topical issues. The IPPR welcomes responses to this series by people and organisations with knowledge and views outside the IPPR. These contributions will be subject to the usual IPPR review process before publication.