

Background

South Africa ranks 10th in the world for highest percentage of women in parliament (41.5%), which is remarkable progress since 1994 when only 2.7% of parliament members were women. Two key historical movements prepared South Africa for its current achievement. The first movement took place in 1954, when the Federation of South African Women launched and the Women's Charter was adopted to remove laws and customs that discriminate against women. The Women's Charter helped integrate women's rights into the human rights movement and the struggle for gender equality became part of the struggle for freedom in South Africa. The second movement was in 1992 when the Women's National Coalition (WNC) was formed to adopt the Women's Charter for Effective Equality and influence the drafting of South Africa's constitution for its new democracy. In the 1990s, as the number of women in government increased, more laws that promoted gender equality were enacted and other national policy changes followed. The South African Development Community Protocol on Gender and Development was adopted in South Africa in 2008 and establishes the target for women's representation at 50%.

Gains

- Engagement of women activists, academics, and politics in the transition process of South Africa into democracy, particularly for negotiation and drafting of constitution by the WNC.
- Adoption of constitutional protections, including an equality clause in the Bill of Rights that provided protections for women's rights and reflected protections sought by the Women's Charter
- Several constitutional court judgments affirming women's rights
- Enactment of laws to promote women's rights, including the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1996, the Domestic Violence Act of 1998, the Maintenance Act of 1998, the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act of 1998, and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act of 2000
- Adoption of the Development Community Protocol on Gender and Development in 2008, establishing the target for women's representation at 50%. The African National Congress (ANC) also increased the target quota of women to 50% in 2009 from 30% in 2002
- Creation of new departments and offices for women, including the Office on the Status of Women and the National Commission on Gender Equality

Challenges

- No legislated quota for women in government
- The Democratic Alliance, the main opposition party to the ANC, does not have a quota and women hold fewer seats in the Democratic Alliance

Key Takeaway

South Africa's progress is based on the history of legal and organizational advocacy, the progress of constitutional and statutory protection, and policy changes that ensued. The relatively greater representation of women in South African politics was achieved within the broader context of the women's movement and political transition from apartheid to democracy. Before the transition to democracy, women in South Africa had been organizing, building coalitions, and advocating for inclusion of women's issues within the political arena and within the larger human rights struggle in South Africa for freedom and equality. Such coalitions eventually helped incorporate women's issues into constitutional law and national law, providing grounds for further policies to encourage women's representation in political office.ⁱ

ⁱ Press Release: *Sluggish Progress on Women in Politics Will Hamper Development*, UN Women, dated March 10, 2015

<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2015/3/press-release-sluggish-progress-on-women-in-politics-will-hamper-development>

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