

# Women’s Political Representation and Development



Swearing-in of Members of Parliament and other government officials in Kigali, Rwanda.  
Photo: Paul Kagame (Source: UN)

## KEY FINDINGS

- Sub-Saharan African countries that have more women in the legislature also have lower infant and child mortality.
- Higher civil society and media participation of women along with a bigger share of women in the legislature reduces infant and child mortality.
- Having more women in parliament has a stronger effect on the reduction of infant and child mortality in countries which have gender quotas and a proportional electoral system.

**What are the implications of women’s political representation? This question gains more relevance in an age when more and more women are taking political leadership positions. Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with one of the most dramatic advances in this matter. However, whether women in parliament actually achieve substantive policy changes for other women is unclear. In a recent working paper (WP 88) for the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), Valeriya Mechkova and Ruth Carlitz address this issue by introducing the “gendered accountability” framework as a tool to analyse policies unequally affecting women. This policy brief presents the key findings of their working paper, as well as several policy implications.**

Does a bigger share of women in political power positions lead to better policy outcomes for women? On the one hand, studies support the idea that having more female representatives in politics leads to improved policy outcomes for women (Bhalotra and Clots-Figueras, 2014; Chattopadhyay and Dufflo, 2004; Swiss et al., 2012). On the other hand, there is also evidence that female representatives in political power positions do not always implement the policies beneficial for women across all sectors that we could expect (Wängnerud, 2009; Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008). Why are there positive results in some cases but not in others? In WP 88 the authors argue that female representation can achieve positive policy outcomes for women under certain societal and institutional conditions.

## From Descriptive to Substantive Representation

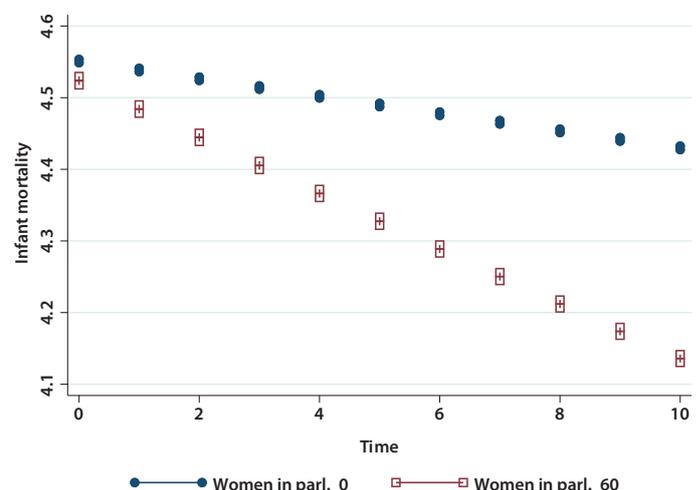
As a starting point, the authors of WP88 showcase the link between descriptive and substantive representation with the examples of infant and child mortality. These two policies are priorities for women due to disproportionate female involvement in childcare (Bhalotra and Clots-Figueras, 2014). Both policy areas are also among the UN goals for developing countries. Nonetheless, many African countries have not reached their targets regarding either infant or child mortality (WP88: 22). The authors find

## DEFINITIONS

The following four terms originate from Hannah Pitkin’s (1967) concept of representation:

- Symbolic representation is the degree to which a representative stands for those she represents.
- Descriptive representation is the resemblance between a representative and the represented.
- Substantive representation is the actual measures a representative takes for the sake of the represented.
- Formal representation is the institutional arrangements that facilitate representation.

**FIGURE 1. PREDICTED VALUES OF INFANT MORTALITY BY PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT. TAKEN FROM CARLITZ AND MECHKOVA (2019).**



that, on average, having more women in the legislature is associated with better outcomes for women. For instance, the higher the share of female MPs the lower infant mortality (Figure 1). The authors of WP 88 answer the question as to how to turn descriptive representation into substantive representation with the help of the “gendered accountability framework.”

## Gendered Accountability

The “gendered accountability” framework bridges the gap between the nominal presence of women in legislatures and the actual implementation of policies benefiting female constituents. On the one hand, we could expect women representatives to act in the interest of women constituents due to their shared preferences. On the other, Mechkova and Carlitz argue that this relationship will be stronger if female representatives feel that they are accountable to their female constituents. Further, the institutional framework in place also plays a role in the extent to which this is possible in practice.

Three societal and institutional conditions, namely high civil society and media participation, gender quotas and proportional/mixed electoral system, can enhance the achievement of such policies.

## Symbolic Representation: Civil Society and Media

One of these conditions is higher participation by women in civil society and the media. As argued by Mechkova and Carlitz, female constituents can pressure their female representatives through civil society and media channels (WP88: 11). This is a way for female principals to hold female agents accountable for the policy decisions they make. WP88 shows that policy outcomes beneficial for women are better in coun-

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Encourage women to become and stay more politically aware, engaged, and involved in civil society and the media.
- Promote the adoption of gender quotas in order to improve the lives of ordinary women.
- Foster proportional or mixed electoral systems, because they give women a higher chance of being elected to legislative bodies.

tries with not only more women in the legislature, but also higher participation of women in civil society and the media (WP88: 16). Engaging women in politics and raising their level of awareness can yield positive results in countries where women have more seats in parliament.

## Formal Representation: Quotas and Elections

What institutional elements can increase the chances of implementing policies that benefit women? First, gender quotas are an important milestone on the path to gender equality. Gender quotas boost symbolic representation, which changes people’s attitudes and habits (WP88:6). Such transformations can change the perception that politics belongs to men and encourage women to participate in politics more actively. Second, proportional representation is credited with raising participation by political outsiders. In WP88 the authors find that in countries with gender quotas, as well as those with proportional or mixed electoral system, the effect of having more women in parliament is stronger on reducing infant mortality rates.

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