



Exploring Gender and Age Disparities in Parliaments: A Regional Comparative Analysis



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Introduction



The concept of inclusion--where potential women and youth populations is harnessed for development has gained prominence in the world of politics. However, its integration into mainstream public affairs and politics remains fraught with challenges, at global, regional, cascading down to national levels. In SADC region, these demographics continue to be underrepresented in political institutions, undermining the potential for inclusive governance. An examination of the age and gender representation across regional parliaments based on Inter-Parliamentary Unit (IPU) data[1] reveal significant discrepancies underscoring the need for the implementation of existing frameworks and policies aimed at fostering inclusive participation in political processes. While this analysis primarily focuses on parliamentary structures; it is noteworthy that in 2024, there have been some significant global advancements in female political presidential leadership. Specifically, Mexico, Namibia, and North Macedonia elected their first female presidents in history. Two other countries, Iceland and Moldova also elected female presidents.



[1] Inter-Parliamentary Union Data as of 1st January 2025



Global Averages of Women in Parliaments

Nearly every country globally operates under some form of parliamentary system which can be classified as either bicameral or unicameral. Among the 190 national parliaments worldwide, 78 (41%) are bicameral and 112 (59%) unicameral. Women's representation in these political institutions has gradually risen over decades. However, despite these advancements, the global picture remains discouraging and concerning, with women occupying an average of only 27.2% of seats in Lower Chambers and 27.4% in Upper Chambers. They also occupy just 23.3% of ministerial positions, and 35.5% of local government seats[2]. At the current rate, gender parity in national legislatures will not be realised before 2063[3].

Table 1: Women Representation, Global and Regional Averages[4]

Global Averages		
	Lower Chamber and unicameral	Upper Chamber
Total MPs	37, 213	6, 993
Men	27, 090	5, 077
Women	10, 123	1, 916
Percentage of Women	27.2%	27.4%

[2] Parliament data from Inter-Parliamentary Union at 1 April 2024. Information compiled by UN Women on women Cabinet Ministers at 1 January 2024; women in local government at 1 January 2023

[3] UN Women calculations [in-brief-key-messages-on-womens-rights-empowerment-and-equality-electoral-and-political-participation-en.pdf](#)

[4] IPU Data As of January 2025

Regional Averages		
	Lower Chamber and unicameral	Upper Chamber
Americas	35.2%	36.1%
Europe	31.8%	31.9%
Sub-Saharan Africa	27.1%	27%
Asia	22.1%	22.0%
Pacific	20.1%	49.5%
Middle East & North Africa	18.1%	11.7%

Regional Comparative Analysis

Progress in women participation varies significantly across countries, reflecting complexities in cultural, political, and socio-economic factors influencing women’s roles in governance. Although more women are being elected to parliaments in the region than ever before, true equality remains a distant goal, and the pace of progress is slow. Many Parliaments continue to be predominantly male, a situation that mirrors entrenched societal norms and institutional biases that impede women's participation in governance. The 2024 election super-cycle^[5] also missed opportunities to increase women participation.

[5] *2024 Elections Super-Cycle: A Key Moment for Gender Equality? | International IDEA*

Table 2: Women Representation in Lower and Upper Chambers

Country	Chamber	% of Women	Electoral System	Structure	Chamber Type
Madagascar	National Assembly	14.1%	Mixed	Bicameral	Lower chamber
	Senate	11.1%	-	Bicameral	Upper chamber
Lesotho	Senate	21.2%	-	Bicameral	Upper chamber
Malawi	National Assembly	20.7%	Plurality/ Majority	Unicameral	-
Mauritius	National Assembly	17.9%	-	Unicameral	-
Mozambique	Assembly of the Republic	39.2%	Proportional Representation	Unicameral	-
Namibia	National Assembly	40.6%	Proportional Representation	Bicameral	Lower chamber
	National Council	14.3%	Proportional Representation	Bicameral	Upper chamber
Seychelles	National Assembly	28.6%	Mixed	Unicameral	-
South Africa	National Assembly	44.7%	Proportional Representation	Bicameral	Lower chamber
	National Council of Provinces	44.4%	-	Bicameral	Upper chamber
Zambia	National Assembly	15.0%	Plurality/ Majority	Unicameral	-
Zimbabwe	National Assembly	30.1%	Mixed	Bicameral	Lower chamber
	Senate	44.3%	Proportional Representation	Bicameral	Upper chamber

Source [Compare data on Parliaments](#) | [IPU Parline: global data on national parliaments](#) [Accessed 6 February 2025]

Significant disparities in female representation exist among various countries in the region as electoral systems employed within countries has had a measurable impact on women's political participation. Generally, countries using the Proportional Representation (PR) tend to exhibit higher levels of women whereas majoritarian systems such as First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) often result in fewer women elected. For instance, Zimbabwe's Upper Chamber features a 44.4% female representation, South Africa, 44.7% of the members in the Lower Chamber are women and Namibia has 40.6%. Mozambique's unicameral Assembly of the Republic also has a notable 39.2% female representation. South Africa exhibits relatively favorable statistics in both its Lower and Upper Chambers, with the latter achieving 44.4% representation in the National Council of Provinces. Conversely, Zimbabwe's Upper Chamber, which operates under a PR electoral system shows a higher percentage (44.4%) compared to 30.1% in the Lower Chamber which employs a mixed system. Madagascar also presents concerning female representation statistics, with only 14.1 in the Lower Chamber and 11,1% in the Upper Chamber, indicating that only one in ten members of both legislative bodies is a woman[6]. These variations highlight the critical role of electoral systems in shaping women's political representation across the region.

Overall, the underrepresentation of women in parliamentary roles undermines the principle of equal representation and perpetuates a narrow perspective on policymaking, effectively excluding diverse needs and interests within the population. This lack of diversity can lead to oversight of critical issues and insufficient consideration of the varied needs and interests of the entire population. Therefore, ensuring women participation at all levels is essential for fostering a more inclusive and equitable political landscape that truly represents all constituents.

[6] IPU Data As of January 2025





Speakers in Parliament

An analysis of female representation within legislative bodies of six selected countries— Eswatini, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, South Africa, Madagascar and Namibia—, reveals that four have appointed female speakers in their Upper Chambers, translating to 66% female representation as to 34% males. This statistic underscores a notable presence of women in these high-level positions, viewed as positive advancement toward gender equality in governance. However, some critics argue that Upper Chambers primarily serve a ceremonial function, potentially undermining and diminishing the significance of this progress. This perspective raises concerns about substantive influence of female representation, indicating that while numbers reflect progress, the actual power dynamics may not correspond with this portrayal of progress.

In stark contrast, the representation of women in the Lower Chambers—commonly perceived as more dynamic legislative bodies—remains significantly lower. Among the same selected countries, only one— accounting for (16%) has appointed a female Speaker leaving 84% with male representation. This disparity highlights persistent challenges in attaining gender parity within these vibrant legislative institutions. It is important to note that advancement in one legislative domain does not necessarily correlate with broader equality throughout the political landscape, indicating a need for sustained attention to gender representation in all facets of governance.



Table 3: Regional Women Representation as Speakers of Parliament

Country	Upper Chamber	Gender	Lower Chamber	Gender
Eswatini	Senate	Female	House of Assembly	Male
Lesotho	Senate	Female	National Assembly	Male
Madagascar	Senate	Eswatini	National Assembly	Male
Namibia	National Council	Eswatini	National Assembly	Male
South Africa	National Council of Provinces	Female	National Assembly	Female
Zimbabwe	Senate	Female	National Assembly	Male

Regional MPs Analysis-Age

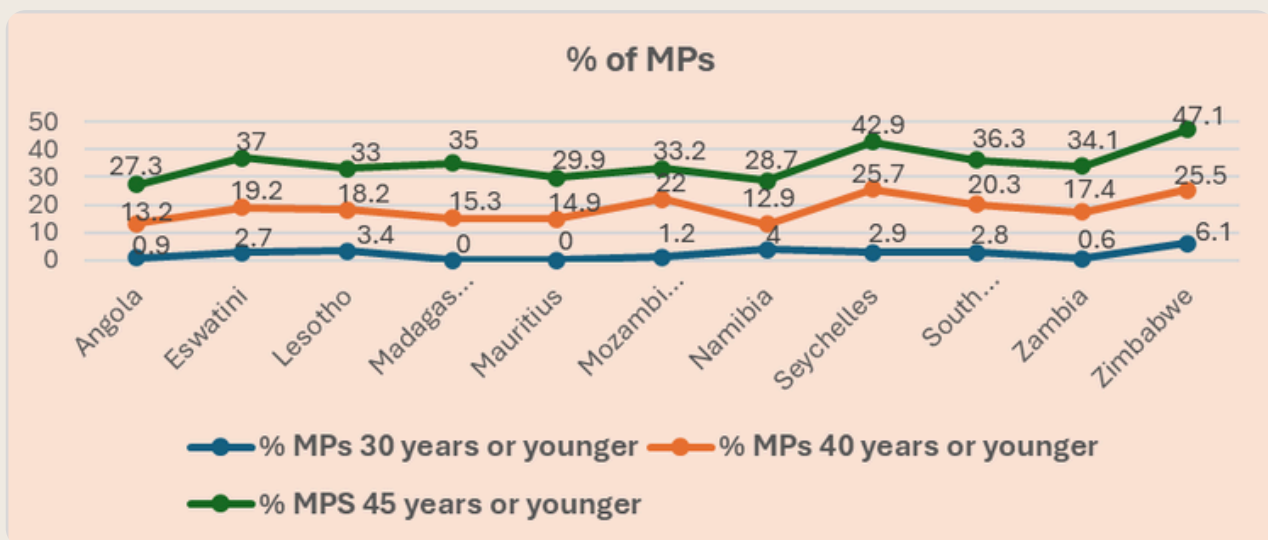
There remain significant deficiencies in the integration of the youth dividend into mainstream politics and public affairs as candidates. An analysis of MPs across various age demographics reflects a pervasive lack of representation across regional parliaments. In Zimbabwe, the implementation of the Youth Quota appears to have facilitated the presence of 6.1% of MPs who are 30 years and younger.[7] While countries exhibit a commitment to amplifying young people’s voices, which may reflect progressive policies or evolving political dynamics, Madagascar and Mauritius illustrate concerning absence of MPs under the age of 30.

This lack of representation highlights the ongoing challenges in fostering inclusive governance that adequately addresses the interests and perspectives of younger populations, thereby limiting the potential for policy solutions that resonate with this demographic.

[7] Youths in Zimbabwe are defined as persons between 15 and 35 years of age. This age range is stipulated in the Constitution of Zimbabwe and is also congruent with the continental definition of youth as defined in the African Youth Charter

In terms of age representation, Namibia reports that 12.9% of its MPs are aged 40 years or younger, while Seychelles exhibits a higher figure, with 25.7% of MPs falling within the same age category. Zimbabwe also reflects a notable presence, with 25.5% of its MPs aged 40 years or younger. These statistics highlight the necessity for continued efforts to enhance youth representation in political institutions, as their involvement is crucial for the development of policies that meet the needs of younger citizens.

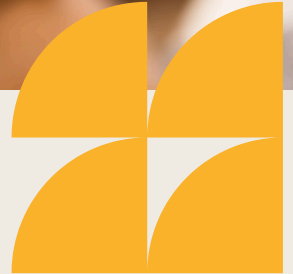
Figure 1: SADC Region Representation of 30-45-year-olds in Parliaments



Conclusions

An analysis of inclusive participation in most countries within the SADC region underscores a complex landscape in which progress coexists with significant challenges. As the region grapples with evolving political dynamics and the imperative for more representative governance, it is crucial to prioritize the integration of women and youth voices into the political arena. Failure to do so risks perpetuating a cycle of disengagement and disillusionment among these marginalised groups, ultimately undermining the democratic fabric of the region.

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