

Why a Minimum of 30% Quota of Women’s Representation in Legislative Assemblies is Needed in Myanmar?



*A woman lawmaker at Union Parliament in 2020.
Photo: The Irrawaddy*

In the article 48 of the Federal Democracy Charter of Myanmar, the principle of “... a quota system of at least 30 percent of women in different levels of decision-making mechanism...” is stated. This minimum of 30 percent is reflected in the policy for “ensuring women’s representation and participation” in the Gender Equality Position Paper of National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) posted in the NUCC’s Facebook page on 8 August 2023. In addition, in the article 182 of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Economic and Social Council endorsed “... 30 percent of women in positions at decision-making levels...” of government and legislature in 1995. The question is why exactly a minimum of 30 percent of members being women is imposed in these national and international gender equality policies? What is the relation between at least 30% quota of women in legislative assemblies and gender equality?

Adopting a certain proportion of women’s representation has been an approach found in gender equality policy and measures of the United Nations since the 1990s. It is said that if the true gender balance is 50-50, ensuring women constitute a large minority, whether 20, 30, or 40 percent, is part of the process of reaching gender balance[1]. In 1990, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Resolution targeted the proportion of women in leadership positions to be 30 percent in 1995 and 50 percent in 2000[2]; policy recommendations in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action continue to insist that member states of the United Nations fulfill ECOSOC’s goal of 30% women’s representation in government and legislature positions. It is natural for UN member states, including Myanmar, to fulfill their obligations and adopt the Beijing Declaration in their national gender equality policy and measures. But a question remains as to why national and international gender equality policies set the percentage of women’s representation in political institutions often at 30 percent?



*Lawmakers of Myanmar parliament in 2016.
Photo: U Aung/Xinhua Press/Corbis*

If the policy goal of setting a minimum women’s participation threshold is for the advancement in women and gender equality, a critical mass could be the most relevant explanation to the choice of 30 percent women’s representation in political institutions. The notion of critical mass refers to the proportion of women that is needed to produce a collective efficacy among women in pursuing the interest of women.

[1] <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas-database/quotas>

[2] <https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr02-03/english/panels/ha/papers/ha0314cb2-1636-1e.pdf>

The concept of critical mass was developed from the work of different scholars studying the relations between different gender ratios and their impacts in different organizational settings and contexts. The studies of Rosabeth Moss Kanter and Drude Dahlerup are identified to be the origin of the critical mass theory. Kanter's work was on examining what proportion of women in an American corporation affects the social and cultural dynamics of the organization[3]. Kanter divided four proportional compositions of two social categories of people in a group and studied the critical role of these compositions in shaping interaction dynamics within the group. These four ratio groups are (1) uniform group- 100 % majority and 0% minority, (2) skewed group- 85% majority and 15 % minority, (3) tilted group- 65-60% majority and 35-40% minority, (4) balanced group- 50% and 50%.[1] In Kanter's theory framework, the composition in skewed group is assumed as the starting point of generating the interaction dynamic between majority and minority people and the response of the minority to the influence of the majority. Kanter generalized this concept to understand the ratio of sex in a group and its influence on potential interactions between men and women "... how group structures shape interaction contexts and influence particular patterns of male-female interaction." According to empirical evidence used by Kanter, after women's presence reaches 35 percent in a group, three potential behavior changes are happening within the women's group (1) formation of potential alliance and coalition between 35 percent minority women that can influence the group's culture (2) women are becoming "individuals differentiated from each other" (Kanter, 1977a, p. 966) after the relative number of women increase (3) as growing number of women in the group could release women free from performance pressure and token isolation, women start to pursue interests that may not fit with female stereotypes or women's issues[2]. Kanter assumed that, at the relative women proportion of 35 %, the possibility of minority women's behavior for alliance formation could change the power dynamic between "majority men" and "relative minority women." In 1988, Dahlerup extended Kanter's theory into "critical mass" in legislation - 30 percent as the crucial point benchmarking the impact of the potential supportive alliance between women legislators to act for women in Scandinavia.[1] As this theory has been developed and tested by many scholars after Kanter and Dahlerup, "critical mass of 30 percent" became a popular mantra, serving as a minimum women's representation target in many organizations.[2] Empirical findings support critical mass in that "... legislatures with high proportions of women introduce and pass more bills on women than their female counterparts in the low-representation legislature." [3] Although the percentage of critical mass is different between Kanter's 35 percent and Dahlerup 30 percent, those studies could give an academic explanation as to why exactly 30 percent women's representation has been used as a measure in gender equality policies.

However, some question the "critical mass" requirement of 30 percent of women's presence as a critical turning point and the assumption of alliance behavior among minority women at this critical point. Agarwal said "... there is no universal agreement on what constitutes the critical mass" and she found that 25-33% is the critical mass for the active share of women on executive committees of community forestry groups in India and Nepal.[1] In the study of "Gender representation and critical mass: women's legislative representation and social spending in 22 OECD countries", the critical mass effect is achieved at 10 percent threshold.[2].

[3] Kanter, R. M. (1977a) 'Some Effects of Proportions on Group Life', *American Journal of Sociology*, 82 (5), 965-90.

Kanter, R. M. (1977b) *Men and Women of the Corporation*. New York: Basic Books.

[4] Kanter, R. M. (1977a) (no 3).

[5] Sarah, C., & Mona, L. K. (2008). Critical mass theory and women's political representation. *Political studies*, 56(3), 725-736.

[6] Dahlerup, D. (1988). From a small to a large minority: Women in Scandinavian politics. *Scandinavian political studies*, 11(4), 275-298.

[7] Sarah, C., & Mona, L. K. (2008). Critical mass theory and women's political representation. *Political studies*, 56(3), 725-736.

[8] Sarah, C., & Mona, L. K. (2008) (n 7). Bratton, K. A. (2005). Critical mass theory revisited: The behavior and success of token women in state legislatures. *Politics & Gender*, 1(1), 97-125.

[9] Agarwal, B. (2023). Gender, Presence, and Representation: Can Presence Alone Make for Effective Representation? *Social Change*, 53(1), 34-50.

[10] Park, S. S. (2017). Gendered representation and critical mass: Women's legislative representation and social spending in 22 OECD countries. *Sociological Perspectives*, 60(6), 1097-1114.

Table 4. Critical Mass: Varying Assertions or Estimates.

Author	Country Context	Critical Mass
Kanter (1977)	US corporations	15% token 40% balanced
Thomas (1994)	United States Legislators	At least 10% but to be effective even 25%–30% insufficient; need parity
Carroll and Taylor (1989); Saint-Germain (1989)	US legislators	25%, 15%
Lovenduski (1997)	UK house of commons	20%
Dahlerup (1988)	Nordic women in parliament	30%
Htun (2002)	Latin American countries	Party quotas specify 30%–35%
Government of India (1993)	Village councils	33% of seats reserved
Agarwal (2010)	Community forestry committees in India, Nepal	25%–33% (tested)

Source: Compiled by the author.

Source: Agarwal, B. (2023). *Gender, Presence, and Representation: Can Presence Alone Make for Effective Representation?* *Social Change*, 53(1), 34-50.



Ethnic Voters in Kayah State in 2020 General Election
Photo: from Nikki Asia's article

Critical mass of women's representation in legislative institutions can only be achieved by the effective representation of women legislators for the passage of bills and laws for the interest of women and gender equality rather than just their presence. In India, there is limited evidence on the passage of bills on women's issues by women legislators, and many women legislators do not see themselves as representatives of women or women's interest[11]. Childs and Krook argued that critical mass is not the matter but the critical actors "... who act individually or collectively to bring about women-friendly policy change", which is the key to effective representation[12]. Increasing the presence of women with no or little commitment to the representation of women's concerns and interests could not result the critical mass. Childs and Krooks found, through a literature review of gender and politics studies, links (or influencing factors) between the presence and effective representation of women in five areas (1) the assumption of collective behavior change happening after the increase in the proportion of women (2) limitation and opportunities presented by the legislative context (3) individual identities and political interest (4) perspective on women-specific issues/ women's interest, and (5) policy-making process[13]. There might be variations in the influencing factors of effective representation of women legislators between countries, but the essence is the commitment and interest of individual actors, the alliance and support of women's organizations, and a supportive legislation process.

In conclusion, policy makers should understand that lobbying for gender quota by setting a minimum 30 percent of women's representation in the national gender policy or the constitution is not a magic bullet for gender equality. Increasing the presence of women in parliament to 30% may not automatically achieve the critical effect of an effective representation of women in legislation for gender equality. Therefore, policy makers should identify and understand the influencing factors in their country's political and social context on women legislators and consistently monitor and ensure the effective representation of women legislators.

[11] Rai, S. M. (2005). *Reserved seats in South Asia: A regional perspective*. In J. Ballington, & A. Kazam (Eds.), *Women in parliament: Beyond numbers* [Revised edition]. International IDEA.

[12] Childs, S., & Krook, M. L. (2009). *Analysing women's substantive representation: From critical mass to critical actors*. *Government and opposition*, 44(2), 125-145.

[13] Childs, S., & Krook, M. L. (2009). *Analysing women's substantive representation: From critical mass to critical actors*. *Government and opposition*, 44(2), 125-145.