



Promoting Gender Equality in Parliament: an Information Brief

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International IDEA is undertaking programming in Myanmar to develop knowledge resources, promote institutional development and facilitate inclusive and informed dialogue about democratic reform options.

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Although women account for more than half of the population of Myanmar, only 4.3 per cent of the Members of Parliament (MPs) are female. As the revised International IDEA Handbook ‘Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers’ argues an essential tenet of any democratic framework is the principle of human rights, including the granting and exercise of the political rights of both men and women. The seed of democracy lies in the principle that the legitimacy of the power to make decisions about peoples’ lives, their society and country should derive from a choice by those who will be affected.

In partnership with the Canadian Parliamentary Centre, International IDEA conducted a workshop with women parliamentarians from the Amyotha and Pyithu Hluttaw and regional parliaments on strategies for women legislators to succeed. Drawing from this Handbook and the publication ‘Designing for Equality’ by International IDEA, this policy brief articulates why equal representation of women in parliament is so important, analyses which obstacles prevent women from becoming MPs and outlines some of the solutions to overcome these barriers.

This is part of a series of information briefs to stimulate in-country reflection and discussion on issues important to Myanmar’s democratic transition. International IDEA information briefs are informative rather than prescriptive and they do not cover all possible scenarios.

Introduction

In the 1995 Beijing Platform of Action, countries from around the world - including Myanmar - agreed to strive for 30 per cent women’s representation in national legislatures. This percentage is seen as a ‘critical mass’ needed for women to be able

to make a meaningful contribution in an otherwise male domain.² Overall the past two decades have seen modest progress, but there is still a long way to go. In Myanmar, for example representation in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw is very skewed to the disadvantage of women as table 1 shows. It is encouraging, however, that in other countries the transition to democracy has contributed to a more rapid development and the overall change in society has opened ‘windows of opportunity’ to promote women’s participation in political life.

Women’s participation and input are not a favour that is granted, nor are they about tokenism for the sake of looking good. Rather, women’s contribution to any political process is a fundamental human right, and a need that contemporary global societies, in the throes of radical technological, social, economic and political transformation, cannot do without. Moreover, since politics is ultimately about ruling people’s lives, it is not possible to believe that it can be done without representative and just inclusion

of those who are affected. The exclusion of women from decision-making bodies limits the possibilities for entrenching the principles of democracy in a society, hindering economic development and discouraging the attainment of gender equality.

Furthermore, the equal participation of women and men in politics follows from obligations under international law since it is one of the cornerstones of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1979.² Today, around 180 countries including Myanmar are party to it and bound to take measures to promote women’s participation in decision-making and leadership positions. This applies also to post-conflict state building. In 2000 UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated that ‘Peace is inextricably linked to equality between women and men ... maintaining and promoting peace and security requires equal participation in decision-making.’

Table 1: Women as percentage of total in various bodies (2014)

Total population (Myanmar) ¹	51.8 %
Members of Pyithu Hluttaw (Myanmar) ²	5.6 %
Members of Amyotha Hluttaw (Myanmar) ²	1.8 %
Members of Parliament (worldwide) ²	21.8 %
Members of the Lower House (Rwanda) ²	63.8 %
Members of Parliament (Cuba) ²	48.9 %
Members of Parliament (Sweden) ²	43.6 %

Sources: 1) Ministry for Immigration and Population, The Population and Housing Census Summary of the Provisional Results, August 2014, p. 5. 2) Inter-Parliamentary Union, World Classification Women in National Parliaments (situation as of 1 October 2014)

¹ For more information on the Beijing Process see: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/decision.htm>

² For more information on CEDAW see: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm>

Therefore, International IDEA is committed to promoting the participation and representation of women in political life. To this end, this policy brief will answer the following questions: What are the major obstacles women confront when entering parliament? What are the different ways of overcoming these obstacles? What are the mechanisms and strategies women can use to influence the parliamentary political process?

Obstacles on the path to women's representation in parliament

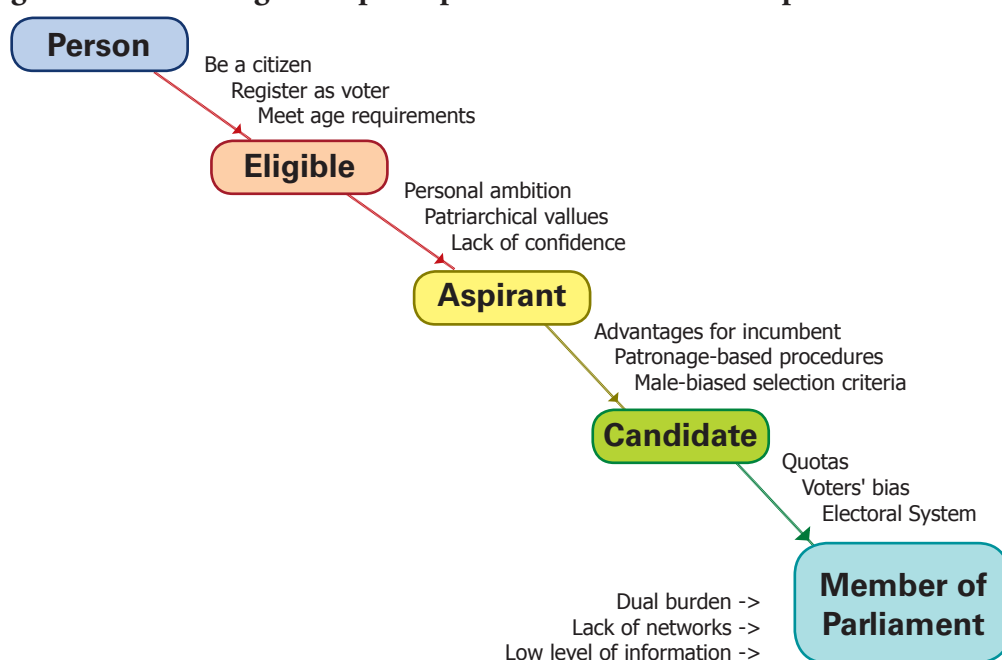
The factors that hamper or facilitate women's political participation vary with level of socio-economic development, geography, culture, and the type of political system. Although socio-economic and ideological factors cannot be ignored, much emphasis has been placed on the political and institutional factors that influence the levels of representation of women, and these can, and very often do, change over a short period of time.

Since different steps of the road to becoming an MP bring about specific challenges for women, it is useful to divide this process into five stages when analysing the obstacles that prevent women from being represented equally: from person to eligible to aspirant to candidate to elected representative to being an MP today (see figure 1). Although it is difficult to quantify the exact magnitude, the percentage of women decreases at every stage.

Stage 1: From a person to an eligible citizen

The step to become an eligible citizen may seem obvious, but normally not every person in a country has the right to stand for election. The requirements to be eligible to run for specific positions vary, but are often specified in the electoral law or even in the constitution and may disproportionately affect women. This can be the case, for example, when you have to be a registered voter or meet certain literacy requirements.

Figure 1: The five stages to equal representation of women in parliament



Stage 2: From an eligible citizen to an aspirant

The second stage consists of a person deciding to stand for elected office and, thus, become an aspirant. This decision is influenced by personal ambition, resources and opportunities to stand. Lack of confidence is one of the main reasons for women's under-representation in formal political institutions, whether parliaments or political parties. In some countries women perceive politics as a 'dirty' game. This has jarred their confidence in their ability to participate in political processes. This effect is compounded when the system suffers from corruption which results in the creation of opportunities for the most negative manifestation of organized crime. A long history of worry about adverse consequences on family members through persecution because of their political participation may further hamper women's ambitions to enter politics.

The social and economic status of women in society also has a direct influence on their participation in political institutions. For example, researchers point to the correlation between women's legislative recruitment and the proportion of women working outside the home, as well as the percentage of women college graduates. Moving out of the house and into the workforce appears to have a consciousness-raising effect on women. Women who want to enter politics find that the political, public, cultural and social environment is often unfriendly or even hostile to them. Men dominate the political arena, men formulate the rules of the political game and men define the standards for evaluation. Furthermore, political life is organized according to male norms and values, and in some cases even male lifestyles. For instance, politics is often based on the idea of

'winners and losers', competition and confrontation, rather than on systematic collaboration and consensus, especially across party lines. This results in women either rejecting politics altogether or rejecting male-style politics.

In many countries, traditions continue to emphasize women's primary roles as mothers and housewives and to restrict them to those roles. Moreover, women are regularly identified and objectified according to their sex in the mainstream media, and are thus made to internalize certain notions of beauty and attractiveness which relate more to a woman's physical capacities than to her mental faculties. Such an approach encourages the long-standing patriarchal stereotype of the 'weaker sex', where women are sexual objects and 'second-class' citizens. A traditional strong, patriarchal value system favours sexually segregated roles and thereby works against the advancement, progress and participation of women in any political process.

Already at this stage there are more men than women. Men, across virtually all cultures, are socialized to see politics as a legitimate sphere for them to act in. This leads to men having a greater knowledge of and interest in politics, and greater political ambition.

Stage 3: From an aspirant to a candidate

The stage at which the party gatekeepers actually choose the candidates is the crucial stage for getting women into office. Because the eligibility pool is already biased towards men, if parties adopt gender-neutral nominating rules the pool of candidates will also be skewed. In fact, selection procedures often disadvantage women. The most

widely valued characteristic, for example, is the aspirant's track record in the party organization and in the constituency as shown by the high rate of re-nominations for incumbents. Even for new candidates, a past history of party participation and activism or visibility in the community through one's profession or leadership positions in civil society organisations is important. Because incumbents and community leaders are often disproportionately male, these criteria can damage women's opportunities. The nomination process within political parties is also biased against women in that 'male characteristics' are often emphasized in selecting candidates.

The type of nomination procedure also matters for the chances of women. We can distinguish between bureaucratic and patronage-oriented selection systems. The first has detailed, explicit and standardized rules which are followed, regardless of who is in a position of power. The second type lacks clear rules and loyalty to those in power in the party is paramount. Clear and open rules can have a distinct advantage for women as they provide women with the opportunity

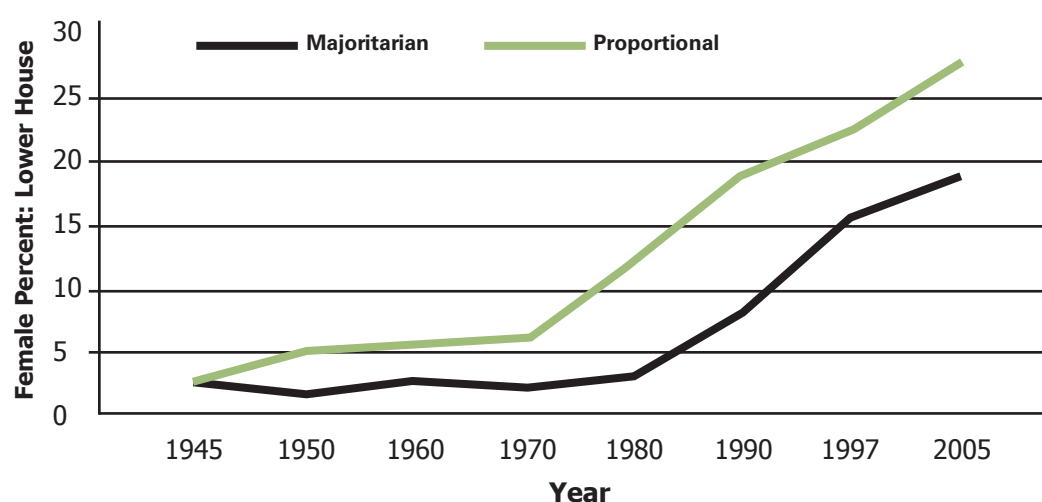
to develop strategies to take advantage of those rules. Therefore, women will enjoy greater opportunities in rule-oriented, bureaucratic parties than in unstructured or clientelistic parties.

Stage 4: From a candidate to an elected representative

When considering women's representation, the electoral system is a crucial factor. As illustrated by figure 1, there are substantial differences in the effects on women's representation between plurality/majority systems - such as the First Past The Post-system (FPTP) used by Myanmar in 2010 - that usually elect only one legislator in each district or systems like Proportional Representation (PR) where several MPs are elected from each electoral district.

There are a number of explanations for these different results across electoral systems. First, PR systems have consistently higher district magnitudes (the number of seats per district) which lead to higher party magnitudes (the number of seats a party wins in a

Figure 1: Percentage of Women in Parliament: Majoritarian vs PR Electoral Systems

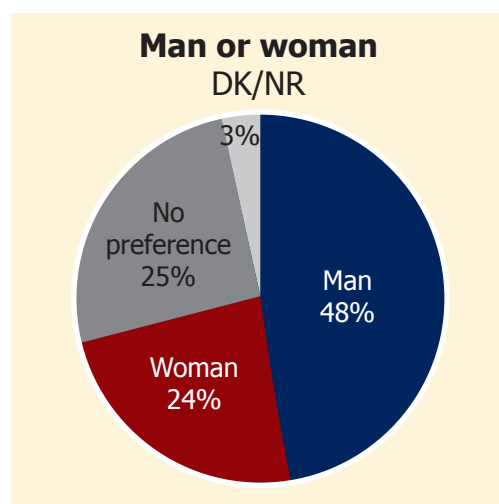


Source: International IDEA, *Women in Parliament: Beyond the Numbers (A Revised Edition)*, 2005; p. 102

district).³ When district magnitudes are higher parties can nominate more candidates. This helps women as it allows parties to go further down the party lists, where women are usually listed. Second, the electoral system shapes the concerns and incentives for the party gatekeepers, who choose candidates. Systems which elect only one representative per district give parties no chance to balance their ticket. Thus, female candidates must compete directly against all men; and nominating a woman means explicitly denying the aspirations of the most powerful male politician in the same district. Balancing the slate may be desirable for party gatekeepers, because a woman candidate can be seen as a benefit by attracting extra voters. Another reason is that different factions within the party may see balancing the ticket as a matter of fairness and dividing safe seats among these factions is also a way of maintaining party peace and assuring their continued support.

Box 1: Do Myanmar voters have a gender preference?

In a recent survey conducted by the International Republican Institute a representative sample of voting age adults was asked the following question: “If there are two candidates campaigning for the same elected office with exactly the same qualification, which one would you be more likely to vote for?” 48 per cent answered they would vote for a man, 24 per cent for a woman and 25 per cent expressed no preference.



Source: International Republican Institute, *Survey of Burma Public Opinion*, 24 December 2013 – 1 February 2014, p. 29

Furthermore, PR systems can also help women because ‘contagion’ – the process by which parties adopt policies initiated by other political parties – is more likely to occur. Since in this system the cost to a party of responding to the adoption of a policy by another party – such as nominating women in prominent positions – is likely to be lower and the gains may be greater.

A last reason to focus on the effect of electoral systems is that they can be, and regularly are, changed. Changing the electoral system often represents a far more realistic goal to work towards than dramatically changing the culture’s view of women.

It is a matter of some dispute whether there is a systematic bias by voters against women at this stage (see box 1 for anecdotal evidence about the gender preference of voters in Myanmar). The individual candidate is most likely to have some effect on vote totals in countries with plurality/majority systems. Even

³ For more information on these concepts, please see: ‘Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook’ (p. 77). This Handbook (in Burmese) is available online or in hard copy.

in these countries, however, party label, evaluation of the job done by the regime in power and views on the prominent political issues of the day tend to swamp the effect of candidates' sex. But even if objectively the individual characteristics of candidates do not matter to the electorate, party officials are convinced that they are important. This in turn impacts on the perception of women as viable candidates on the part of those who provide money for election campaigns. The chances of women to get elected may further be worsened by lack of access to political networks and to certain geographic areas, such as conflict zones.

Finally, the role of the mass media in an election process cannot be emphasized enough as it has a big influence on public opinion and public consciousness. Often, the mass media tend to minimize coverage of events and organizations of interest to women. Practically speaking, if there is lack of proper coverage of women's issues and the activities of women MPs, this contributes to a lack of public awareness about them, which in turn translates into a lack of constituency for women MPs.

Stage 5: From an elected representative to someone who holds a seat in parliament today

Even when women are elected as representatives they face many challenges: structural, personal and party-political. They are often not taken seriously by their male colleagues, the lack of access to well-developed education and training systems for women's leadership, the level of information is poor and the uneven gender balance within the family continues to deter women from taking an independent stand on issues.

Women MPs often carry a dual burden: they may have a full-time job as wives and mothers caring for their families and doing a disproportionate share of domestic work. Additionally, they have to do their party and constituency work, serve on different committees and network within their parties, at multi-party levels and with women outside parliament. Moreover, the male-dominated working pattern is further reflected in the parliamentary work schedule with late hours, much traveling, few facilities and a lack of supportive structures for working mothers including MPs. Lastly, they suffer from a lack of coordination and support networks between women MPs and other public organizations, such as trade (labour) unions and women's groups; This is especially true in new democracies as there tends to be a lack of awareness of the potential benefits of this networking function or a lack of resources to invest in such contacts.

Overcoming obstacles; the way forward for women's representation

The slowly increasing share of women in parliamentary representation has not been an inevitable consequence of the broadening of the political space in democratization processes. Rather, it has resulted from sustained mobilization, institutional engineering, political party commitment and greater recognition by the international community of the need for gender equality. Partnership between men and women has been an essential factor in accomplishing change and impacting on politics. In each country, however, the precise methods will be different.

One of the most important characteristics of society that correlate with women's representation levels is a country's state of development. Development leads to a weakening of traditional values, decreased fertility rates, increased urbanization, greater education and labour force participation for women, and attitudinal changes in perceptions regarding the appropriate role for women — all factors that increase women's political resources and reduce existing barriers to political activity. Research indicates that there is a minimum level of development (including women's labour force participation) that is needed to create the foundation for other variables, such as electoral systems, to have an effect. Without that basis, the factors that assist women in gaining representation in more developed countries simply have no effect. It appears that in most less developed countries the forces aligned against female political activity are so great as to permit only minimal representation.

The main mission of the women's movement is to instil the right type of confidence and assertiveness among them. It needs leaders who can express proper ideological messages and inspire confidence. New ways of thinking and acting, educational activities, research about women's status, and means of communication among women's organizations are needed.

Political parties are entrusted with perhaps the most strategic responsibility in democracy—to prepare and select candidates for election and to support them in positions of leadership and governance. As political parties are the gatekeepers to elected office, since they choose lists of candidates, they hold the key to the political advancement of women. So long as political parties remain highly gendered institutions,

women's access to leadership positions will be impeded. They must scout, select and train capable female candidates.

As described above, electoral systems can greatly influence women's representation. Still, immediate results cannot be guaranteed. Quotas, in contrast, are often seen as a 'fast track' and they can lead, and have led, to historic leaps in women's political representation. Quotas for women entail that women must constitute a certain number or percentage of the members of a body, whether it is a candidate list, a parliamentary assembly, a committee or a government. Designing effective quota to advance gender equality requires careful consideration of several points that are addressed in box 2. Gender quotas, for example, are easier to implement in proportional list systems than in plurality-majority systems, where each party only presents one candidate in each constituency.

In general, quotas for women represent a shift from the notion of 'equal opportunity' to 'equality of result'. The argument is based on the experience that equality as a goal cannot be reached by formal equal treatment as a means. If barriers exist, it is argued, compensatory measures must be introduced as a means to reach equality of result. Quotas may be seen as a temporary measure, that is to say, until the barriers for women's entry into politics are removed. Research on 'quota' women has revealed many cases of purely symbolic representation of women, especially if the women elected have no power base in a constituency of their own, or in the parties or in strong movements outside the political institutions. However, there are also many success stories of women who felt totally isolated and powerless in the beginning but eventually gained confidence and influence.

Box 2: Five crucial points about quotas

Just having quotas rules is not enough. Whether a quota system meets its objective depends largely on the process and method of implementation and enforcement. Moreover, the quota must be embedded in the selection processes of political parties from the very beginning. Even then, it is important to keep in mind that quotas alone do not remove all barriers to women's entry into legislative structures. It is one thing to put women in power. It is quite another to transform the way politicians behave.

1. The kind of quota. Does it specify a minimum percentage of candidates for election that must

be women or does it set aside a certain number of seats for women among representatives in a legislature? If it is a candidate centred quota, does it specify where the candidates have to be placed on a list (e.g. every other place) or in which districts in the country? Is it specified in legislation (e.g. the constitution or electoral law) or is it voluntarily adopted by political parties?

2. The size of the quota. Does it say 50% or something else?

3. The scope of the quota. Does it apply to all the country, and all of the parts of the electoral system, or only certain parts?

4. The electoral system. Does it fit with the electoral system,

or do the characteristics of the electoral system work against the quota? Have as many stakeholders as possible been included in the discussion, design and implementation phases?

5. The sanctions. Are there any? Is the electoral management body willing and able to supervise and enforce the quota system? Are they severe enough to ensure compliance by political parties?

Source: International IDEA, Designing for Equality; Best-fit, medium-fit and non-favourable combinations of electoral systems and gender quotas, 2007

Women also must think carefully about their own goals, strategies and tactics. It is important to help women already in parliament to deliver on their promises and to equip them with the necessary skills and strategies to ensure that issues raised by women are taken into account in the debate and the decision making that take place in parliament. The 'rules based' strategy of learning, using and changing the rules is based on the belief that there is a need for change and that an objective in electing women MPs is to secure change. Each tactic embodies various strategies which fall under four broad categories: the nature of the institution of parliament, issues of representation, the discourse used about and for women MPs, and legislative or policy outputs (see table 2).

Conclusion

This information brief has provided an overview of the challenges for women to gain equal representation in parliament as well as some suggestions to promote

gender equality in politics. The analysis as to which obstacles are most important and which solutions should get priority will be different for every country. It is hoped that this policy brief will inspire women and men in Myanmar who are committed to these goals to take the required dialogue and advocacy forward.

The cause of gender equality stands to benefit from a lively and public debate about topics such as how to advance parliamentary support for women and the question which election campaign strategies are most effective in promoting women candidates.

Table 2: Elements of a ‘rules strategy’ for women MPs to make an impact

	Institutional/procedural & Representation	Influence on Output and Discourse
Learning the rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Network with media and women’s organizations on various levels - Participate in training on parliamentary codes of conduct and drafting laws - Develop effective public speaking, communication and lobby skills - Understand and handle the media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Caucus with media, national and international organizations/interest groups working for the enhancement of women’s position generally - Draw attention to sexist discourse - Establish a presence within different committees (e.g. budget, foreign affairs)
Using the rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nominate and vote for women in internal elections - Draw attention to absence of women in key positions - Push for equal opportunity positions - Campaign to expand existing structures to include women’s concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Influence parliamentary agendas: introduce women-sensitive measures - Establish public enquiries on women’s issues and put them on the agenda - Use the media to get attention for women’s concerns and reach out to women MPs’ constituencies
Changing the rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Change candidate selection rules for the entire party, especially leadership positions - Introduce mechanisms (e.g. quota systems, right to speak first) to address under-representation on certain committees/issues - Establish national machinery to monitor implementation and ensure accountability - Participate in institutional reform to ensure women-friendly changes - Promote concerted and impact-based positive action to encourage women’s participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encourage the providing of financial incentives to programmes to facilitate women’s decision-making endeavours (e.g. capacity-building programmes) - Cooperate with the women’s movement and the media to change the image of women as ‘only’ housewives, and the way women’s contributions are assessed - Be proud of identity as a woman, instead of attempting to imitate men - Expand legislation to include issues of importance to women (e.g. peace-making, human rights, abortion) and make laws woman-friendly

Feedback on this paper and any suggestions for future topics can be directed to: info-myanmar@idea.int

Further Reading

Has this information brief made you curious to learn more about the experiences, opportunities and challenges involved in promoting women's role in politics? The revised edition of the Handbook 'Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers' (in English) examines the options, collects evidence of best practice, and encourages the reformers. It is targeted to all those promoting the participation and representation of women in political structures and available online here: <http://www.idea.int/publications/wip2/>

The International IDEA publication 'Designing for Equality' provides an overview of the 'fit' of the various electoral systems - as described in 'The New International IDEA Handbook: Electoral System Design' - with different kinds of quota. It is now available in Burmese and can be downloaded here: http://www.idea.int/publications/designing_for_equality/my.cfm To obtain a free hard copy of this publication please email (info-myanmar@idea.int).