



The “Magic” Number: Women’s Critical Mass and Substantive Representation in Angola

“Sihirli” Sayı: Angola’da Kadınların Kritik Eşik ve Niteliksel Temsil İlişkisi

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Abstract

This study explores whether and how a critical mass of women in parliament, after years of underrepresentation, translates into substantive representation of women (SRW). Critical mass in politics refers to a threshold number necessary to effect change in legislative contexts. It is rooted in the assumed causal relationship between two forms of representation—descriptive and substantive—implying that SRW depends on active political engagement. This paper offers a nuanced perspective by deconstructing SRW into a process and an outcome, and it suggests four potential scenarios that connect critical mass to SRW. Through a comparative within-case analysis of Angola, a country that witnessed the emergence of a critical mass of women through the adoption of gender quotas after a prolonged period of underrepresentation, this study reveals that SRW can manifest in multiple forms. This study challenges the assumption of a direct link between SRW and descriptive representation of women (DRW) by demonstrating that the impact of DRW on SRW is multiple and can proceed independently as both a process and an outcome. Ultimately, this paper underscores the need for a more comprehensive understanding of SRW in diverse political contexts.

Keywords: Women’s political representation, critical mass, substantive representation, descriptive representation, Angola

Öz

Bu çalışma, uzun yıllar süren temsil eksikliğinin ardından parlamentodaki kadınların kritik eşik düzeyinde temsiline kadınların niteliksel temsiline etkilerini ve bu etkilerin ne şekilde ortaya çıktığını incelemektedir. Siyasal temsilde kritik eşik, yasama bağlamında dönüştürücü etki sağlayabilmek için gerekli olan en düşük sayısal oranı ifade etmektedir. Niceliksel ve niteliksel temsil arasındaki nedensel ilişkiye dayalı bu ölçüt, kadın temsiline kadınların aktif siyasi katılımlarına bağlı olduğu varsayımını taşımaktadır. Bu makale, niteliksel temsili süreç ve sonuç olarak iki boyutta kavramsallaştırarak kritik eşik düzeyindeki temsil ile niteliksel temsil arasındaki ilişkiyi dört farklı olasılık üzerinden açıklamaktadır ve böylece daha kapsamlı bir yaklaşım sunmaktadır. Cinsiyet kotalarının benimsenmesiyle uzun bir temsil eksikliği döneminin ardından kritik eşik düzeyinde kadın temsiline ortaya çıktığı Angola’nın karşılaştırmalı vaka analizi yoluyla bu çalışma niteliksel temsiline farklı biçimlerde ortaya çıkabileceğini göstermektedir. Ayrıca, niceliksel temsil ile niteliksel temsil arasında doğrudan bir bağlantı olduğu varsayımını sorgulayarak, bu bağlantının farklı biçimlerde kurulabileceğini ve bunun süreç ve sonuç açısından bağımsız bir şekilde gerçekleşebileceğini ortaya koymaktadır. Böylelikle bu makale, farklı siyasi bağlamlara dikkat çekerek niteliksel temsiline daha kapsamlı bir şekilde anlaşılmasının gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kadınların siyasal temsili, kritik eşik, niteliksel temsil, niceliksel temsil, Angola

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Introduction

Women's under-representation globally, with women comprising half the population yet holding only 27% of elected political positions worldwide (IPU, 2024), has led to widespread adoption of legislated candidate gender quotas in over 60 countries (International IDEA, 2023). These quotas typically aim for a 30% threshold, rooted in the critical mass debate in policy and scholarship, which suggests that women need to constitute at least 30% of parliamentary representation to have a significant impact on political decision-making.

As women have long been marginalised in political decision making, the question of how and whether their increasing presence makes a difference in parliament has been a subject of inquiry. While descriptive representation is typically identified in numerical terms, substantive representation is a more complex and contested phenomenon that is understood from varying perspectives (Celis et al., 2008; Clayton, 2021; Joshi, 2023). The link between these two forms of representation is a central topic in feminist scholarship on gender and politics (Beckwith, 2007; Htun et al., 2013; Mansbridge 1999; Park, 2023; Phillips 1995; Young 2002). The quest to establish this link surfaces in discussions over whether women constitute a distinct group best represented by women themselves (Beckwith, 2014; Celis & Childs, 2012; Celis et al., 2008; Clayton, 2021; O'Brien & Piscopo, 2019). Supporting this claim, empirical work in different countries is more inclined to find a positive relationship between the descriptive representation of women (DRW) and substantive representation of women (SRW) (Bauer & Britton 2006; Coffé & Reiser, 2018; Devlin & Elgie, 2008; Kalra & Joshi, 2020; Shim, 2021; Tam, 2020; Taylor-Robinson & Heath, 2003; Wang, 2023).

Despite this extensive scholarship on gender quotas, analysis of the critical mass argument in relation to both forms of representation is limited. The conceptualisation of SRW remains problematic since the existing literature most often does not differentiate between the processes and outcomes when analysing the links between the presence or absence of a critical mass of women and SRW (Francheschet & Piscopo, 2008). Furthermore, there has been a significant oversight in understanding the diverse trajectories of non-Western women concerning the issue of representation (Shim, 2021, p. 142). In response to these concerns, my aim is to address a more intricate question: To what extent and in what forms does the presence of a critical mass of women in parliament, following years of underrepresentation, contribute to SRW in a non-Western context?

I explore this question through a comparative within-case analysis of Angola, where a critical mass of women emerged following the adoption of gender quotas in 2005, after a prolonged period of underrepresentation. To capture the immediate effects, I analyse the electoral periods of 2004-2008 and 2008-2012. Using data from official sources, reports, and newspapers, I compare legislative outcomes and processes related to women's issues, including constitutional amendments, international agreements, family code, violence against women, and labour and poverty. My argument is twofold: First, process-oriented SRW may exhibit similarities between the presence and absence of a critical mass of women. Second, outcome-oriented SRW is more likely to occur in women with a critical mass, even without significant changes in process-oriented SRW.

While this study focuses on the immediate impact of the critical mass of women in parliament on SRW, it is important to acknowledge that no numbers are “magical,” and progress in gender equality is longitudinal (Beckwith, 2007; Grey, 2006, p. 494). In the past decade, Angola has significantly improved women’s political representation, with women now holding 38.1% of parliamentary seats and 9 out of 23 ministerial positions (Pacatolo et al., 2023). However, despite these advancements, Angola ranks 125th out of 146 countries in the 2022 Global Gender Gap Index (WEF, 2022, p. 10), and concerns such as gender-based violence, access to education, and formal employment persist among women (Kitombe & Pacatolo, 2023). Although undoubtedly significant, women’s political representation is just one facet of the broader landscape of progress in achieving gender equality.

The paper proceeds as follows: First, it presents an overview of the existing literature on women’s political representation and group identity that underlies the critical mass debate. Next, I introduce an alternative conceptualisation of SRW, modelling four scenarios for the link between critical mass and SRW. Finally, I analyse the Angolan case by comparing two electoral terms across specific areas of concern.

Literature on the Connection between Women’s Representation and Critical Mass

Linking Descriptive and Substantive Representations

The nexus between DRW and SRW forms a pivotal aspect of feminist discussions on women’s political representation, rooted in Hanna Pitkin’s conceptual framework (Tremblay, 2006, p. 503). Pitkin (1967, p. 61) delineates descriptive representation as the degree to which a representative resembles those they represent, implying a correspondence between the characteristics of the representative and the represented group, effectively rendering representatives as reflective mirrors of their constituency (Childs, 2007, p. 75). In contrast, substantive representation delves into “the content of acting for others” and denotes an endeavour undertaken “in behalf of; in the interest of, as the agent of, someone else” (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 113-114). It materialises when a representative, irrespective of their characteristics, actively pursues policies and interests that align with a specific group through deliberate actions. Therefore, DRW hinges on the numerical presence of women representatives, whereas SRW pivots not on the actors themselves but on the actions taken on behalf of women. Substantive representation is thus more complex, as Joshi (2023, p. 2) notes citing Dahlerup (2014: 63), spanning various dimensions from the voter-representative relationship to legislative processes and policy outcomes, encompassing a broad study of actors, sites, goals, and means.

The quest to establish a connection between DRW and SRW has led feminist scholarship to grapple with the question of whether women can be effectively represented by women. This inquiry emerges in discussions concerning the definition of women as a distinct group separate from men and the determination of what constitutes genuine representation for women. Existing research underscores that representatives with a descriptive link to a particular social group are more inclined to prioritise that group’s concerns, allocate more time to them, and endeavour to elevate them to legislative priority (Mansbridge, 2005, p. 625).

Women as a Group

When discussing women's political representation, the question of whether women hold distinct interests, issues, and needs that men do not adequately represent is a central and contested focus of feminist scholarship on gender and politics (Beckwith, 2014; Celis & Childs, 2012; Celis et al., 2008). Scholars who argue that representation should align with the shared experiences of the represented suggest that women's interests are best advocated for by women themselves (Mansbridge, 1999; Phillips, 1995, 1998; Sapiro, 1998; Weldon, 2002). While women's identities are multiple (Reinhart, 1992, p. 41), and essentializing them as homogeneous might be misleading (Clayton, 2021), they share common experiences related to issues such as pregnancy, reproduction, marriage, employment, violence, and education (Sapiro, 1998, p. 167). Descriptive representation is seen as a potential catalyst for advancing substantive representation of these interests (Mansbridge, 1999, p. 638). Representatives and voters who share common experiences of subordination are more likely to foster trust-based relationships (Mansbridge, 1999, p. 641). Young (2002) distinguishes between the representation of individual interests and social perspectives, emphasising the importance of shared experiences, social positions and knowledge in the latter. Even women with conflicting interests can find common ground in their shared relational experiences, such as balancing motherhood and work responsibilities (Weldon, 2002, p. 1157).

These arguments emphasise the importance of the "politics of presence" as described by Phillips (1995). While what constitutes a women's issue is an ongoing debate and can differ across local contexts and specific policy areas (Beckwith, 2014; Celis & Childs, 2012; Celis et al., 2008; Clayton, 2021), without women's political participation, there is a higher likelihood that women's interests will be overlooked. This idea forms the basis for the critical mass concept (Grey, 2006, p. 493).

Women as a Critical Mass

A critical mass represents "a threshold number (or percentage) of women in a legislature necessary for transforming the legislative context from one in which women-friendly policy is unlikely to one in which the opportunities for women's policy success are increased" (Grey et al., 2006, p. 491). The term originates from Kanter's (1977) work on organisational culture, later adapted to legislative contexts by Dahlerup (1988), and endorsed by the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, aiming for a 30% critical mass of women in decision-making positions, paving the way for gender quotas (Dahlerup, 2006, p. 515; Paxton & Hughes, 2007, p. 208).

This concept is central to discussions on "whether women in politics will make a difference" (Dahlerup, 2006, p. 517). Mansbridge (2005, p. 622) observed, "descriptive representation by gender improves substantive outcomes for women in every polity for which we have a measure." Studies across various countries show that women representatives are more inclined to address women's issues in parliamentary settings, significantly influencing politics. Supporting empirical evidence comes from Sweden (Wangnerud, 2000), Honduras (Taylor-Robinson & Heath, 2003), African countries (Bauer & Britton 2006), and Rwanda (Devlin & Elgie, 2008).

Recent research also confirms that women representatives are more likely to focus on women's issues and concerns (Coffé & Reiser, 2018; Kalra & Joshi, 2020; Lippmann,

2022; Shim, 2021; Tam, 2020; Wang, 2023). Furthermore, studies on parliaments in countries including the United States, New Zealand, and Scandinavian countries where women have achieved a critical mass demonstrate women’s ability to reshape political culture, steer parliamentary debates, and influence legislation (Bratton, 2005; Childs & Krook, 2009; Dahlerup, 1988; Grey, 2002; Schwindt-Bayer & Mishler, 2005; Thomas, 1991; Vega & Firestone, 1995).

An Alternative Categorisation of the Connection between Critical Mass and Substantive Representation

The critical mass literature, while generally optimistic, overlooks several key issues. First, despite significant attention to gender quotas and theoretical discussions on DRW and SRW, little attention has been paid to understanding how a critical mass of women in parliament relates to SRW prospects (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008, p. 394). Second, we must further explore whether the presence or absence of a critical mass of women has different implications for shaping discourses and outcomes. This does not imply that discursive shifts are insignificant for SRW, but it prompts an analysis of whether gendering political agendas (not outcomes) can occur in a critical mass. For this analysis, a careful distinction between outcomes and processes is necessary, which is often undermined (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008). Third, women’s representation scholarship focuses on European or Latin American countries (Shim, 2021, p. 142). However, African women’s distinct experiences with land rights, poverty alleviation, HIV/AIDS, sexual freedom, and violence against women (Devlin & Elgie, 2008) can generate different representation trajectories (Bauer & Britton, 2006).

With these considerations, I extend Franceschet and Piscopo’s (2008) twofold conceptualisation of SRW as a process and an outcome. The former involves active engagement on behalf of women, including advocating for laws addressing women’s issues, collaborating with women’s organisations, and elevating women’s concerns to the political agenda. The latter category encompasses the adoption of laws, policies, agreements, and national programmes on women’s issues. Distinguishing between processes and outcomes is essential because gendering legislative discussions may not result in laws and policies. However, whether successful or not, parliamentary

Table 1
Four Scenarios Depicting the Impact of the Critical Mass of Women (CMW) on Their Twofold Substantive Representation (SRW)

Scenarios	Impact of CMW on SRW	Description
I	<i>Strongest</i> Substantive representation as an outcome and as a process	Women successfully gendering both the political agenda and legislative outcomes
II	<i>Partial</i> Substantive representation as a process	Women successfully gendering the political agenda but not successfully gendering legislative outcomes
III	<i>Partial</i> Substantive representation as an outcome while process remains the same	Women continuing with the same political agenda but also successfully gendering legislative outcomes
IV	<i>Weakest</i> Substantive representation neither as a process nor as an outcome	Women’s presence does not lead to changes in either the political agenda or outcomes

discussions signal progress in SRW by shaping agendas, prioritising women's issues, and incorporating them into legislative debates. Drawing from Franceschet and Piscopo (2008), I propose four broad scenarios for assessing the impact of critical mass on SRW.

In Scenario I, women in a critical mass in parliament successfully gender both the political agenda and legislative outcomes, resulting in the strongest relationship between DRW and SRW. Scenario II shows that women effectively shape the political agenda but do not impact legislative outcomes despite their critical mass, thus limiting the influence of DRW to process-oriented SRW. Scenario III demonstrates that women's critical mass does not influence the current political agenda but impacts legislative outcomes, emphasising the role of a critical mass in SRW as an outcome. In Scenario VI, despite being a critical mass in parliament, women do not actively alter politics, suggesting that DRW has no discernible impact on SRW.

Few studies have explored SRW as a process and an outcome. For instance, in Argentina, Htun et al. (2013) and Franceschet and Piscopo (2008) found that women's increased presence in parliament enhances SRW as a process but decreases it as an outcome because of male-dominated institutional barriers and party divisions among women. Park (2023), in a cross-national analysis of quota-adopting parliaments, demonstrated that women's increased presence enhances SRW as both a process and an outcome, especially in previously severely underrepresented parliaments. Given the complexity of SRW, I contribute to this scholarship by exploring multiple pathways of its manifestations.

As Clayton (2021) suggests, gender quotas influence representation in two main ways: by altering the behaviour of legislators, women or men, and by enhancing women's collective influence over decisions. However, empirical findings vary depending on how representation is measured and how gendered institutional settings mediate representation practises in specific legislative contexts (Beckwith, 2007). These mediating factors are multiple, including the broader political environment, institutional norms, party divisions among women, representatives' newness, and hierarchical positions (Celis & Childs, 2012, p. 214; Tripp & Kang, 2008). This conditional nature of SRW makes it extremely important to explore various contexts with alternative conceptual frameworks, especially understudied ones like Angola.

Women's Critical Mass and Representation in Angola

After centuries of Portuguese colonisation, Angola gained independence in 1975, leading to a civil war primarily between the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), until a peace agreement aimed at democratisation in 2002. This conflict has disproportionately affected women, subjecting them to violence, poverty, harassment, health issues, polygamy, land disputes, and domestic challenges (Accord 15, 2004). Post-conflict countries often witness higher rates of women in parliaments through quotas and enact legislative reforms for women's rights during transition periods due to international pressures and women's involvement in peace negotiations (Tripp, 2015). Similarly, less democratic countries may adopt quotas to instrumentalize women's increased representation as a symbol of commitment to democracy (Towns, 2012, p. 194). Indeed, Angola adopted quota legislation during its transition to democracy, spurred by

a window of opportunity and pressure from the women’s parliamentary group, which forged crossparty alliances among women (Tripp, 2015, p. 132).

The Ministry of Family and the Promotion of Women (MINFAMU) has played a key role in advancing gender equality and establishing vital international connections (ADB, 2008). In 2005, Angola’s Political Parties Law mandated that all political parties must adopt rules that promote equal opportunities and gender equity, establishing candidate gender quotas with a minimum gender representation of 30%. Angola follows a presidential-parliamentary system with a unicameral parliament, the National Assembly, that is, an elected through a party-list proportional representation system. The adoption of quotas resulted in a significant increase in women’s seats in the National Assembly, rising from 9.6% in 1992 to 37.3% in 2008 (IPU, 2024). In the 2008 elections, MPLA, the ruling party since independence and currently representing the left-wing, secured 81% of the seats, including 77 women out of its 191 members of parliament, while UNITA, the main opposition party currently representing the right-wing, elected 4 women out of its 16 members of parliament (Adams, 2012, p. 6).

I conduct a comparative within-case analysis of Angola to explore whether women’s critical mass in parliament impacts SRW as a process and an outcome. I compare the periods before and after the quota implementation: 2004-2008 and 2008 (September) - 2012 (August). I selected the case as follows: First, among countries where women achieved 30% of parliamentary seats, I identified those with legislated candidate quotas (International IDEA, 2023) since such increases occur through mandatory measures (Mansbridge, 2005, p. 622). Next, I pinpointed countries where women rapidly attained a 30% critical mass following prolonged underrepresentation to capture the immediate effects of the critical mass. Lastly, from the three countries meeting these criteria (Angola, Burundi, Costa Rica), I chose Angola due to data availability. Data were obtained from multiple sources: documents and reports from the United Nations, CEDAW, IFAD, USAID, and various women’s organisations; Angolan newspapers; and official documents, including the constitution and laws, translated from Portuguese to English.

I rely on feminist literature to identify women’s issues and guide my focus on legislative outcomes and processes (Bratton, 2005, p. 106). Accordingly, I analyse constitutional amendments, international agreements, family code, labour and poverty, and legislation against violence against women. I measure “SRW as a process” through discussions on policies and laws, and “SRW as an outcome” through concrete results, including legislation, policies, national programmes, and international agreements.

Angolan Parliament: Before and After the Women’s Critical Mass

Constitutional amendments

Constitution drafting, 2004-2008

The 1992 Constitution of Angola ensured equal rights for all citizens, regardless of “color, race, ethnic group, sex, place of birth, religion, ideology, level of education, or economic or social status” (Article 18). After the civil war, Parliament made significant efforts to draft a constitution focused on gender equality. Genoveva Lino, the MINFAMU

Minister, stressed the importance of gender equality “as a key element for the building of an equal and just society” and encouraged both women and men to participate in the constitution-drafting process (ANGOP, 2009, 2010a). Deputy Minister of Culture Cornélio Caley similarly advocated for equal legal standing, emphasising that “women and men must stand on the same plan of the national juridical order” (ANGOP, 2010b). Women at the ministerial level organised meetings to promote gender equality in peacebuilding. Despite these efforts, the Constitution excluded substantial gender-related provisions.

The new Constitution, 2008-2012

The parliamentary efforts culminated in the adoption of a new Constitution in 2010. This updated Constitution retains the clause emphasising equality and nondiscrimination among citizens, irrespective of sex, race, age, or other forms of discrimination.¹ However, it expands on its predecessor by explicitly defining “equality between men and women” as a fundamental duty of the state.² Additionally, it reaffirms the state’s commitment to ensuring equality and nondiscrimination before the law on all grounds.³

Another significant legal advancement in the Constitution pertains to customary law. Many Angolans reside in traditionally organised communities governed by customary law, which became more prevalent in the absence of formal regulations, especially during civil war. Customary law addresses various issues, including marriage, land, child custody, adultery, divorce, and paternity. Therefore, any regulations concerning customary law directly impact women’s status within the family and society (ADB, 2008, 9). Under the new Constitution, customary law is acknowledged as a valid source of law⁴ but is deemed invalid if it contravenes constitutional provisions on nondiscrimination or equality.⁵ With a stronger emphasis on women’s rights and an enhanced principle of gender equality, the gender-biased aspects of customary law could be invalidated under the new Constitution (UNCTAD, 2013, 19). Thus, the adoption of the new Constitution during this period represents a progressive outcome for women’s rights after years of deliberation.

International agreements

Angola ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1984, considered the international bill of rights for women. In the latter half of the 2000s, particularly after the civil war, Angola ratified more international agreements on gender equality. These include the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography in 2005,

1 Constitution of Angola, Art. 21(h): The fundamental tasks of the Angolan state shall be to promote equal rights and opportunities between Angolans, regardless of origins, race, party affiliations, sex, color, age or any other form of discrimination.

2 Constitution of Angola, Art. 21(k)

3 Constitution of Angola, Art. 23: (1) Everyone shall be equal under the Constitution and by law. (2) No-one may be discriminated against, privileged, deprived of any right or exempted from any duty on the basis of ancestry, sex, race, ethnicity, color, disability, language, place of birth, religion, political, ideological or philosophical beliefs, level of education or economic, social or professional status.

4 Constitution of Angola, Art. 7: The validity and legal force of custom which does not contradict the Constitution and does not threaten human dignity shall be recognized.

5 Constitution of Angola, Art. 223 (1) The state shall recognize the status, role and functions of the institutions of the traditional authorities founded in accordance with customary law which do not contradict the Constitution.

the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict in 2007, the CEDAW Protocol in 2007, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa in 2007, and the Protocol of the Southern African Development Community on Gender and Development in 2008. To align with international gender equality standards, Angola reviewed all discriminatory laws in compliance with the requirements of these agreements. Consequently, the revision process has facilitated legal and institutional improvements and fostered discussions on gender equality.

Family code

Angola’s family affairs have been governed by the Family Code (*Código da Família*) since 1988 (UNCTAD, 2013, p. 17). It mandates equal rights and responsibilities⁶ for husbands and wives, whether in marriage or union,⁷ in areas including household management,⁸ divorce,⁹ parental authority, inheritance, and marital property.¹⁰ Since the late 2000s, the Family Code has been under revision due to its perceived inadequacy in addressing the country’s evolving conditions and post-civil war effects on women and families. After the new Constitution was adopted, Maria Teresa Cardoso of MINFAMU stressed the need to revise the Family Code to ensure comprehensive state protection for families, especially regarding gender equality: “As everyone knows a new Constitution was approved and it is urgent the need for adjusting the Family Code so that the family can get broad protection from the state, mainly with regard to the equality between man and woman” (ANGOP, 2010c).

In 2012, government discussions on revising the Family Code were ongoing, with the Council of Ministers deliberating on its approval, as reported to the UN (UN, 2012, p. 2). Despite the absence of concrete changes since 2004, the process of drafting a new version has persisted.

Labour and poverty

Between 2004 and 2008

The 2000 General Labour Law (*Lei Geral do Trabalho*) promotes equal treatment for citizens and prohibits discrimination based on “race, color, sex, ethnic origin, marital status, religious or political ideals social, trade union membership or language.”¹¹ Additionally, Angola ratified several ILO conventions, including one on equal pay for equal work (ILO, 2023). The Law addresses the rights of women workers, including

6 Civil Code, Art. 3(1)

7 Civil Code, Art. 29(1)

8 Civil Code, Art. 45

9 Civil Code, Art. 79

10 Civil Code, Art. 54

11 General Labour Law Art. 3(1)

maternity leave,¹² equal pay,¹³ paternity leave,¹⁴ and pregnant women's protection.¹⁵ For women workers' concerns within trade unions, the Federation of Trade Unions of Angola agreed to form the National Committee for Women in 2005, which actively engaged in public discussions (ADB, 2008, p. 14). Additionally, the government initiated the Rural Women Support Programme in 2007 to enhance rural women's productivity, entrepreneurship, and empowerment (UN, 2012, p. 3). These developments signify progress for women workers.

Angola's poverty combat strategy, *Estratégia de Combate à Pobreza* (2004), integrated gender considerations as a "crosscutting issue" in various initiatives, recognising women's inclusion as essential for effective poverty reduction and national development (ADB, 2008, p. 7; UNCTAD, 2013). The targets were developed by MINFAMU's National Strategy and the Plan for Gender Equality Promotion (2006), focusing on women's education, maternal and child healthcare, economic and political participation, healthcare access, education services, HIV/AIDS prevention, and domestic violence prevention (ADB, 2008, p. 12). These efforts have led to progress in addressing women's labour and poverty-related issues, with tangible policy outcomes and ongoing endeavours.

Between 2008 and 2012

In 2010, MINFAMU established the Committee for Maternal Death Prevention to reduce maternal and infant mortality rates and raise awareness through campaigns and training programmes (CEDAW, 2013, p. 6). The Committee published an Action Programme (2009-2013) outlining strategies for women's domestic labour, women's involvement in unions, and sexually transmitted disease training (van Klaveren et al., 2009, p. 14).

Significant legislative changes occurred in 2011 when Angola enacted Presidential Decrees to enhance the status of women workers. The Decrees improved maternity rights, nursing, family allowances, and benefits.¹⁶ Employers were mandated to provide these benefits, resulting in increased support, extended maternity leave and shared responsibilities between employers and the state. Pitra Neto, Minister of Public Administration, Labour, and Social Security, emphasised that these revisions aimed to benefit "young people, children, and women" (ANGOP, 2013). Furthermore, Maria Fernanda Francisco, the Deputy General Secretary of the Trade Union Federation, urged the government to focus more on women's domestic work and support the adoption of the ILO Convention (IDWF, 2012).

During this period, Angola made progress towards gender equality. Vice Minister Ana Paula S. Sacramento Neto regarded gender equality as a "cornerstone" in the government's efforts to achieve the "harmonious development of the country, the

12 General Labour Law, Art. 272

13 General Labour Law, Art. 164, 268

14 General Labour Law, Art. 152

15 General Labour Law, Art. 227, 272

16 Presidential Decree No. 8/11 of January 7, 2011. See Presidential Decree No. 8/11 of January 7, 2011, Art. 10 (maternity benefits), and Presidential Decree No. 8/11 of January 11, 2007, Arts. 5 and 9 (maternity pay); Presidential Decree No. 8/11 of January 7, 2011, Art. 13 (remuneration of nursing breaks); Presidential Decree No. 8/11 of January 7, 2011, Art. 10 (financing of benefits)

wellbeing of the families and the consolidation of democracy”. She highlighted ongoing initiatives, including microcredits and support for rural entrepreneurship, and underscored that women “should reduce their economic dependence on men in order to balance the inequalities that are still to be addressed” (CEDAW, 2009). This period witnessed concrete outcomes and a political agenda for gender equality.

Violence against women

Between 2004 and 2008

After the civil war, women’s vulnerability to violence, including sexual violence and domestic abuse, worsened due to customary laws granting men authority over women, reinforced by cultural and institutional norms, especially in rural areas (CEDAW, 2004, p. 19; IFAD, 2002, p. 4). Despite the severity of the issue, Angola lacked laws specifically addressing violence against women and prosecuting sexual crimes (ADB, 2008, p. 10; CEDAW, 2002, p. 15). MINFAMU launched public campaigns and discussions to propose a Law on Domestic Violence and draft a National Gender Plan (De Carvalho et al., 2011, p. 90; UNDP, 2005, p. 16). However, despite these ministerial efforts, the law was not adopted until June 2011.

Since the early 2000s, addressing violence against women has been a prominent concern for both women’s organisations and the government. In September 2004, Eduarda Borja, a member of the *Rede Mulheres*, stated, “Today, practically every Angolan family is home to some form of violence. In richer households, this violence can be more sophisticated and, better hidden, but it still exists. In poorer families it is more brutal” (IRIN, 2004). She added that despite the government’s concern, “there is still a long way to go before this kind of law is introduced - we first need to complete our studies and come up with a concrete proposal” (IRIN, 2004).

In a statement to the 2006 UN Commission on the Status of Women, Vice Minister of MINFAMU Ana Paula Sacramento, expressed concerns about domestic violence, describing it as having “reached worrying proportions.” A year later, in 2007, she reiterated that the violence rate was “very worrying” (ANGOP, 2007). A 2008 study by the Angolan Women’s Organisation revealed nearly 4000 incidents of violence in just one district in a year (IMPOWR, 2011). By 2010, the number of cases remained alarmingly high, with 6515 recorded incidents of violence (ICGLR, 2012, p. 4). Hence, the government and NGOs collaborated to combat violence through campaigns, public awareness meetings, and training programmes (CEDAW, 2002, p. 5). However, progress in enacting a law criminalising violence remained slow in parliament, with the issue receiving significant attention on the agenda but failing to produce legal outcomes.

Between 2008 and 2012

After nearly a decade, the Law Against Domestic Violence was enacted in 2011, alongside the Plan for Combating Domestic Violence and the Law for the Protection and Development of Children¹⁷ (CEDAW, 2013, p. 3). The Law criminalises domestic violence and provides protection to women and their families, including safe houses,

¹⁷ Law No. 25/12 of the Protection and Development of Children

medical treatment, legal assistance, and financial support (UN, 2013). It mandates the establishment of reception centres and specialised training to assist domestic violence victims at police stations and hospitals (HRC, 2012, p. 9). Furthermore, it categorises violence as a “public crime,” enabling both victims and third parties to report cases to the police (ICGLR, 2012, p. 4). Genoveva Lino, the Minister of MINFAMU, described the new legislation as a “victory for all Angolans,” playing a significant role in its adoption (SAGPA, 2012). Angolan laws now cover various forms of domestic violence, including physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse, and explicitly address workplace sexual harassment, imposing penalties.¹⁸

The government also enhanced collaborations with international organisations. In 2012, MINFAMU collaborated with the UNFPA in the UNITE to Put an End to Violence campaign and launched the Zero Tolerance campaign (CEDAW, 2013, p. 3; UN, 2013, p. 4). Maria Filomena Delgado, the MINFAMU Minister, viewed these initiatives as “a further step in combating violence, which is essential for building a truly democratic society, based on respect for the rights and the dignity of people, thus ensuring full equality between men and women” (UN, 2013, p. 4).

Yet, Penal Code articles could potentially discriminate against homosexuality (ARC International, 2010). However, public discussions on LGBT rights grew, as exemplified by a televised programme in 2011 where homosexuals discussed discrimination and intimidation based on sexual orientation (USDOS, 2011). The National Assembly also tackled human trafficking, especially its impact on women and girls by drafting a law to prevent trafficking (UN, 2013, p. 4). Consequently, notable progress was made in combating violence against women and addressing related issues.

Substantive Representation: Process, Outcome, or Both?

The review of legislation, policies, and discussions regarding women’s issues in Angola indicates a sustained emphasis on gender equality in the post-civil war era.¹⁹ MINFAMU (currently MASFAMU, referring to the Ministry of Social Action, Family and Women’s Promotion), established in 2002 and led by women ministers, has been vital in advancing gender equality policies in collaboration with women’s organisations and international partners. However, the achievements have varied in terms of process and outcome. On the outcome front, the second period (2008-2012) demonstrates more success compared to the first (2004-2008). Key developments in the 2008-2012 period include the enactment of new constitutional laws, the implementation of national programmes, the issuance of presidential decrees, the passage of the violence against women law, the establishment of a new ministerial-level committee, and the adoption of the SADC protocol. In contrast, the primary outcome achievements in the 2004-2008 period encompassed the creation of a women’s trade union committee, the formulation of a national equality strategy, the initiation of a programme to support rural women, the implementation of the quota law, and the ratification of regional and international agreements.

In contrast to outcomes, the process remained largely consistent between the two periods. From 2004 to 2008, discussions revolved around drafts of the constitution, the

¹⁸ Criminalisation of violence is supported by the additional clauses to the Penal Code, Article 173.

¹⁹ The summary of the key achievements in terms of process and outcome is presented in the Appendix.

family code, and the law on violence against women, with a national focus on women’s roles in economic growth. These discussions persisted into the second period, including the drafting of the constitution, the family code, and initiatives related to rural women’s entrepreneurship. Only a few minor new discussions emerged during this period, such as those related to discrimination against homosexuals and trafficking in women. Therefore, the critical mass of women played a pivotal role in ensuring that while the agenda remained similar between the two periods, the outcomes were more noticeable and progressive in the second period.

This finding challenges and confirms feminist scholarship that suggests a positive link between DRW and SRW (Dahlerup, 1988; Mansbridge 1999; Phillips 1995, 1998; Young 2002). This is a challenge because the twofold conceptualisation of SRW complicates drawing a straightforward connection. Viewing SRW as a process and an outcome reveals that parliamentary agendas and actions may not necessarily align simultaneously (Htun et al. 2013; Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008; Park, 2023). However, this does not mean that agenda setting alone is a failure for SRW because it remains a significant component of SRW as a process. During the first period, despite the notably low representation of women, the political agenda on gender equality was still developing. This demonstrates that SRW as a process does not necessarily rely on achieving a 30% critical mass or DRW in general (Bratton, 2005; Beckwith, 2007). National concerns about integrating citizens into peace-building processes, coupled with significant social and economic transformations, underscored the role of women in the post-conflict context (Tripp, 2015). This emphasis facilitated closer collaboration with international organisations advocating for women’s rights between 2004 and 2008 (Townes, 2012).

However, the most significant outcomes for women were achieved only in the presence of a critical mass between 2008 and 2012, confirming the positive association between DRW and SRW. Despite similarities in the agenda during periods of high and low women’s representation, SRW as an outcome was only possible when a critical mass of women was present. Consequently, the Angolan case aligns with the third scenario described earlier (Table 1), suggesting that issues previously debated in the absence of a critical mass of women could transform into outcomes once women have formed a critical mass.

While this study explores the immediate impact of the critical mass of women on SRW, it is essential to recognise that political representation is just one aspect of women’s status in society (Park, 2023). Despite advancements in legislative processes and outcomes, there are both progress and challenges to the broader societal impact. In recent decades, alongside improvements in women’s parliamentary representation, Angola has made significant progress in gender equality indicators, including maternal mortality, adolescent fertility, and women’s completion of secondary education, while its Gender Inequality Index (GII) value has improved from 0.725 to 0.520 (Table 2). However, out of 195 countries, it ranked 133rd in 2022. Compared with the sub-Saharan Africa region, Angola performs better in maternal mortality, women’s parliamentary representation, and labour force participation but worse in adolescent fertility rates and lower secondary education completion for women (Table 2).

Table 2
UNDP Gender Inequality Index

	Gender Inequality Index	Maternal mortality ratio	Adolescent birth rate	Share of seats in parliament	Population with at least some secondary education (% ages 25 and older)		Labor force participation rate (% ages 15 and older)	
					Women	Men	Women	Men
Angola Year	<i>Value</i>	<i>(deaths per 100,000 live births)</i>	<i>(births per 1,000 women ages 15–19)</i>	<i>(% held by women)</i>				
1990	0,725	1102	198,8	9,5	4,5	23,3	—	—
1995	0,714	1023	193,2	9,5	—	—	—	—
2000	0,671	860	177,3	15,5	—	—	—	—
2005	0,636	550	171,0	15,0	—	—	62,3	74,4
2010	0,554	367	165,0	38,6	15,7	25,9	75,7	79,0
2015	0,548	274	148,1	36,8	19,9	38,2	44,2	56,1
2020	0,529	222	139,8	30,0	21,3	37,4	73,9	77,7
2022	0,520	222	135,8	33,6	21,3	37,4	74,7	78,2
Sub-Saharan Africa (2022)	0,565	516	99,3	26,4	30,9	42,0	63,9	76,4

Despite recent fluctuations, women currently occupy 38.6% of the seats in the Angolan parliament (IPU, 2024). However, women's representation at the local level needs further improvement. In 2017, out of 18 provincial governors, only one was a woman (Dos Santos Monteiro, 2022, p.153). Additionally, despite its vast natural resources, Angola is classified as a lower-middle-income country, with 31.1% of its population living below \$2.15 a day and a life expectancy age of 62 in recent years, exacerbating gendered patterns (Tripp, 2015; World Bank, 2023). Angolans identify gender-based violence as their primary concern regarding women's rights, followed by unequal access to education and formal employment (Kitombe & Pacatolo, 2023; Nadya & Fernandes, 2017). In 2018, 24.7% of women reported recent physical and/or sexual violence experienced by an intimate partner (UN Women, 2023). In this context, over 51.3% of women express dissatisfaction with the government's efforts to promote gender equality (Afrobarometer, 2023).

Additionally, government repression of dissent has hindered independent civil society organisations and women's collective organising around feminist agendas in Angola (Mouzinho & Cutaia, 2017; Tripp, 2015). The ruling party, MPLA, despite recent seat losses to UNITA, continues to dominate parliament, forming a one-party rule. Angola, currently scoring 28/100 in Freedom House's global freedom index, has maintained a "not free" status since the 1970s. Similarly, ranking 109th among 167 countries in the Economist Democracy Index, it is classified as an "authoritarian regime," despite recent improvements.

Angola's recent gender equality discourse however continues to emphasise women's empowerment, democratic consolidation, and violence prevention, with significant contributions from women in parliament. In 2017, Angola adopted its first National

Action Plan (2017-2020) focusing on women’s participation in peacebuilding, amplifying NGO voices, empowering women, combating gender-based violence and implementing gender-responsive budgeting (SecurityWomen, 2023). In 2023, the first woman vice-president of Angola, Esperança da Costa, along with women ministers, hosted the first International Women’s Forum for Peace and Democracy, highlighting gender equality concerns across all spheres, including peace consolidation (The Guardian, 2023).

These processes underscore the importance of women’s continued presence in parliament to influence legislative processes and outcomes, while also emphasising the need for further efforts to address the structural challenges faced by women and involve feminist organisations in decision making.

Conclusion

This article has delved into the complexities of women’s descriptive and substantive representation, focusing on the contested nature of their connections and revisiting the critical mass debate. Challenging the assumption of a straightforward link between descriptive and substantive representation, it underscores the potential for multiple paths to substantive representation when considering representation as both a process and an outcome. Through the case of Angola, the article has investigated the extent to which, and in what ways (process or outcome), a critical mass of women in parliament, after years of underrepresentation, can instigate change in a non-Western context. It asserts, first, that process-oriented SRW (such as parliamentary agendas and discussions on policies and laws) may exhibit similarities regardless of the presence or absence of a critical mass of women in parliament. Second, this shows that outcome-oriented substantive representation (including legislation, policies, national programmes, and international agreements) is more likely to materialise when a critical mass of women is present in parliament.

These findings reveal that while descriptive representation may set the stage, the active engagement and critical mass of women ultimately drive the outcomes of women’s rights agendas. While focusing on the immediate impact of the critical mass of women in parliament on SRW, this study underscores the importance of acknowledging that no numbers are “magical,” and progress in gender equality is longitudinal and often nonlinear. Therefore, any analysis of SRW should consider these points: First, women’s political representation, while undoubtedly significant, is just one facet of the broader landscape of progress in achieving gender equality. Second, representation practises are mediated by gendered power structures and institutional contexts, which are shaped by multiple factors, including the broader political environment, gender norms, women’s party divisions, and hierarchical positions. Finally, although higher levels of women’s political representation may facilitate advancements in legislative processes and outcomes, their impact on wider society in terms of gender equality is often not equally proportional and requires collective and sustained efforts over time.

Investigating women’s increased representation in authoritarian regimes is essential to understand how their presence makes a difference under political repression and additional institutional barriers, including dominant party systems and hierarchical party structures. In Angola, the repression of civil society, including women’s organisations,

the fewer women representatives from minority parties than from the majority, and the limited opportunities for women representatives in lower-level positions all contribute to slow progress in gender equality. Further research on women's increased representation in repressive political contexts should explore how this numerical advantage can more effectively decrease barriers through alliances formed by women representatives within and outside parliament, focusing on both vertical (cross-party and local women's organisations) and horizontal alliances (between different levels of representatives and engagement with international bodies).

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Appendix: Key Gender Policy Developments in Angola

	2004-2008 <i>Before the women’s critical mass</i>				2008 (Sep 6)-2012 (Aug 31) <i>After the women’s critical mass</i>			
	Year	Substantive Representation as a Process	Year	Substantive Representation as an Outcome	Year	Substantive Representation as a Process	Year	Substantive Representation as an Outcome
Constitution	2002	*A new draft in progress		No outcome	2008 - 2010	*A new draft in progress	2010	*Constitution, Art. 21(k) Equality between men and women as one of the fundamental tasks of the state *Constitution, Art. 7, Customary law is recognised *Constitution, Art. 223 (1), Customary law is subordinated to the Constitution
Family Code	2002	*A new draft in progress		No outcome	2010	*A new draft in progress		No outcome
Labour & Poverty	2005	*Gender equality is considered a “crosscutting issue” to fight poverty *Women in trade unions *Women’s economic role	2004 2004 2005 2006 2007	*UNDP Angola Enterprise Programme *National Strategy to Combat Poverty *National Committee for Women in Trade Unions *National Strategy and Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality *The Rural Women Support Programme	2009	*A concern about microcredits and rural entrepreneurship support for women	2009 2011 2011	*2009-2013 Action Programme *Presidential Decree No. 8/11 - Art. 5 & 9 (maternity pay) - Art. 10 (financing of benefits) - Art. 13 (remuneration of nursing breaks) *UNDP Promoting Angolan Women’s Empowerment through CSOs
Violence against Women	2004 - 2008	*MINFAMU campaigns *Discussion on a National Gender Plan *Discussion on the law against violence against women *NGO support: <i>Rede Mulheres</i> , and Angolan Women’s Organisation	2006	*National Strategy and Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality	2011 2012	*Public discussion on discrimination against homosexuals *MINFAMU considering a draft law on Trafficking of Human Beings	2011 2011 2012 2012 2012	*Law N. 25/11 Violence Against Women *National Plan for Combating Domestic Violence *Law N. 25/12 of the Protection and Development of Children *Campaign: UNITE to Put an End to Violence *Campaign: Zero Tolerance
International Agreements			2005 2007 2007 2007	*Convention on the Rights of Children *Convention on the Rights of Children in Armed Conflict *CEDAW Protocol *Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa			2008	*SADC Protocol
Other			2005	*Law No 2/05, Art. 20 (l) of Political Parties: 30% candidate gender quota			2010 2010	*MINFAMU Committee for the Prevention of Maternal deaths *World Bank Municipal Health Service Strengthening

