Review of *Ringing up the Changes: Gender in Southern African Politics*, edited by Colleen Lowe Morna, Johannesburg : Gender Links.

Reviewed by Cheryl Hendricks

African feminists have long advocated that gender be a central component of governance and development on the continent. This advocacy has gained widespread acceptance and has resulted in the expressed commitment by the African Union to ensure equal representation of women in its governing structures and the advancement of gender-sensitive policies. The Southern African Development Community (SADC), as a regional body promoting economic development, peace and security in the region, has made great strides in furthering the pursuit of gender equity. In 1997, SADC Heads of States signed the Declaration on Gender Development that committed their respective governments to gender mainstreaming, and to the achievement of a target of at least 30% women in political and decision-making structures by 2005. With one year to go to meet this target, Ringing up the Changes provides an assessment of the progress made by governments in Southern Africa and the impact of these changes.

This book, to my knowledge, represents the first comprehensive review of women in decision-making structures in Africa. It is the result of collective research and theoretical engagement by prominent gender activists in the region. Gertrude Mongella, the recently elected President of the Pan African Parliament, writes the foreword. The stated objectives of the study are to:

• present theoretical, empirical and practical evidence of the value that women bring to parliament, cabinet and local government;

• show that gender equality is intrinsic to participatory democracy and that without participation by women in decision-making structures, democracy is undermined;

• highlight ways to increase women's effective participation;

• contribute to advocacy campaigns using the research; and

• strengthen the arguments for equal participation by women in decision-making structures through such evidence.

This benchmark study not only succeeds in achieving these objectives, but will be an important tool for the women's movement in its struggle for greater parity in decision-making structures, and for gender mainstreaming. Hopefully, the book will influence the larger, more male-centred studies of governance, many of which have paid only lip-service to the tangible differences that a "critical mass" of women in power structures can and do make in transforming societies.

Ringing up the Changes compares the experiences of six countries in Southern Africa: South Africa, Zambia, Lesotho, Mozambique, Seychelles and Namibia. The selection of the case studies was guided by the need to measure impact across these countries. The three structures of decision-making selected for scrutiny were cabinet, parliament and local government. Data was primarily derived from questionnaires and open-ended interviews. The book also highlights sub-case studies, for example, looking at specific Acts, or the impact on/made by specific women in decision-making structures. One hundred and seventy-two decision-makers, 63% of whom were women and 37% men, were interviewed. The inclusion of men was viewed as a "significant innovation of this study, since one of the yardsticks set for measuring change is whether the presence of women in decision-making

begins to affect the way men view gender issues" (37).

The conceptual framework builds on Thenjiwe Mtinso's thesis that "access and numbers are a prerequisite for, but do not guarantee transformation." It is only when "women are present in significant strengths, and are able to participate effectively, that they are likely to start 'ringing up the changes'" (31). This study proves this to be the case. It focuses on electoral systems, quotas, political party commitment and regional and international obligations to explain differences between countries in women's access to decision-making structures. The factors deemed to help or hinder effective participation are identified as social (culture, media), political (history, electoral system, political party) institutional (language, support) and personal (background and exposure). The indicators of change were institutional transformation (infrastructure, family-friendly work environment, changes in the style of debate, women's influence within the institution and supportive structures); personal transformation (confidence, attitudinal change by men, change in gender stereotypes concerning roles and responsibilities); transformation of key tools of government (existence of laws and policies to remove gender discrimination, extent to which a gender perspective informs laws and policies, and extent to which gender considerations are built into the delivery of services). The editor rightly cautions that these changes do not automatically translate into the transformation of society, but assumes that politics is a catalyst for social change.

The study provides evidence to support the often-stated principle that women's equal participation in political decision-making is a necessary component of good governance. The impact of the presence of women ranges from changes to the physical structures of buildings (for example, erecting basic amenities for their use), to profound changes in the style, procedures, norms, discourses, policies and practices of governing institutions. The introduction of a gender budget is a case in point. The study also notes that women parliamentarians and councillors are more accessible and more responsive to the demands for the delivery of service. When more women participate, there is a spill-over effect as men begin to engage with issues of gender equality.

The emphasis throughout the study is on the need to combine both qualitative and quantitative arguments for women's participation. The author concludes that without a "critical mass" of women in governing structures, it is difficult to effect change, but that mere presence is not sufficient: the need to link presence with responsiveness and accountability is central to the argument for gender equity. The continued dominance of patriarchal cultures is cited as the most important barrier to women in politics.

With regard to the performance of specific countries, the study found that only three in the SADC region will fulfil their commitment to achieving the 30% target (South Africa, Seychelles and Mozambique); two stand a good chance of doing so (Tanzania, Namibia), five are unlikely to do so (Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Angola and Zimbabwe), three have missed the opportunity (Swaziland, Zambia and Mauritius), and a big question mark hangs over the DRC. It is clear that much more work needs to be done, especially since the yardstick has been moved to a fifty-fifty gender representation. However, in both global and continental terms, the SADC countries are not faring too badly. Their numbers for women in parliament world-wide ranks second only to the Nordic countries, although the difference is at least 20%. Continentally, the SADC region has the largest number of women in parliament.

Another key finding of this study is that countries that have a proportional representation (PR) system and/or quotas do better at meeting the target for women's representation. The PR electoral system has been the focus of debate within the region. Some analysts argue that the system should be applied throughout the region in order to increase participation by

minority groups. Using South Africa as their example, others claim that the PR system leads to a lack of accountability, and that the dominant party has been able to increase its majority despite the system. The finding of this study, that the PR system is beneficial in increasing women's participation, injects a new dynamic into the debate. More detailed research is required to find out if it is legislated quotas or the PR system itself that accounts for the increased participation by women. Put differently, in the absence of a PR system, but with a legislated quota for all parties, can similar results be obtained? Tanzania appears to provide evidence in the affirmative. Seychelles has been singled out for attention, as it has neither a PR system nor quotas, yet it has achieved the 30% target. The explanation given is that women are more educated than men in this country, and consequently have a longer history of participation in government. This suggests that education should be near the top of the list of recommendations for effecting women's participation.

A study of this nature is obviously limited in the conclusions that it can make. For example, the study cannot (and states this openly) draw conclusions about the impact on the status of women in general. The focus has been on changes within decision-making structures rather than broader societal transformation. Yet, if we accept that equity in women's participation and representation is a democratic necessity, we must be prepared to "ring up" further changes for the people whom they represent. The challenge for a follow-up study will be to concentrate on the larger societal impact of women's participation.

Colleen Lowe Morna and her collaborators have succeeded in indicating the qualitative difference that women bring to political structures. They have also provided both a rich and textured account of women's personal achievements, challenges and life stories, and a study packed with empirical evidence and theoretical exposition. The book could have done with more thorough editing. That said, it is a book that I highly recommend and expect to become a standard reference.

Cheryl Hendricks is with the Centre for Conflict Resolution, University of Cape Town.