

*Female Representation in the Political Sphere Worldwide:
Reality and Challenges*

تمثيل المرأة في المجال السياسي عبر أنحاء العالم: الواقع والتحديات

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Reçu le: 20/02/2020

Accepté le: 23/09/2020

Publié le: 28/05/2021

Abstract :

The growing participation and representation of females in politics is one of the most remarkable developments of the late twentieth century. For the first time, women in all countries and social classes are becoming politically active, achieving dramatic gains in the number and-kind of offices they hold. Women have recently made dramatic gains in electoral politics, winning a number of high profile positions of national leadership and a record number of seats in parliaments around the world. Despite women's increased political involvement, they are much less likely than men to hold elected offices and they still encounter a number of challenges .

Keywords: female, political representation, reality and challenges.

ملخص:

تعد المشاركة والتمثيل المتزايدين للمرأة في السياسة أحد أبرز التطورات في أواخر القرن العشرين. للمرة الأولى، أصبحت النساء في جميع البلدان والطبقات الاجتماعية نشيطات سياسياً، ويحققن مكاسب كبيرة في عدد ونوع المناصب التي يشغلونها حيث حققت النساء مؤخرًا مكاسب كبيرة في الساحة السياسية ، وفزن بعدد من المناصب البارزة في القيادة الوطنية وعدد قياسي من المقاعد في البرلمانات حول العالم. على الرغم من المشاركة السياسية المتزايدة للمرأة ، إلا أنها أقل تمثيلاً بكثير من الرجال لشغل المناصب المنتخبة

تظل المرأة تواجه جملة من التحديات التي تقف عائقا امام التمثيل المتساو للنساء بالمقارنة مع الرجال.
الكلمات مفتاحية :
النساء ، التمثيل السياسي ، الواقع و التحديات

INTRODUCTION

Underrepresentation of women is, of course, found throughout the world, and no country has found a way to completely or perfectly balance its representative institutions. Democracy implies that all voices are being heard. Women constitute 50 percent of the global population but are, nevertheless, underrepresented in decision-making processes at all governance levels around the world because they are still lacking access to political leadership and resources. The exceedingly low ration of women in political bodies is a phenomenon for established and new democracies alike. Universal suffrage did not lead to representative legislatures. But the challenge in ensuring women's participation goes beyond electing a larger number of women in parliament. It is also about changing the endemic perception that the public domain is a male domain. The paper aims at shedding light at women who managed to win elected offices as leaders in some parts of the world. It also aims at identifying challenges encountering women while seeking office.

1. Women Leaders in the Contemporary Period

Shirley Nuss points out in "Women in Political Life: Global Trends" to the fact that as nations around the world celebrate International Women's Day, the number of countries that have had a female leader continues to expand. But the list is still relatively short, and even when women have made it to power, they have rarely led for a long time. Fifty-six of the 146 nations (38%) studied by the World Economic Forum in 2014 and 2016 have had a female head of government or state

for at least one year in the past half-century. In 31 of these countries, women have led for five years or less; in 10 nations, they have led for only a year. The Marshall Islands, which is not included on the WEF list of countries, has also had a female leader for one year (6).

Over the past 150 years, democratic regimes have dismantled legal barriers to the political participation of women and minorities. Yet women, minorities, and minority women remain substantially underrepresented in high-level political positions worldwide (Bird et al. 201). To rectify persisting inequalities, most countries in the world have adopted quotas laws or policies requiring candidate lists or representative bodies to include women; racial, ethnic minorities; or members of other targeted groups. To date, however, researchers have not empirically evaluated how quotas affect minority women (qtd. in Hughes 1).

Tam O'Neil and Pilar Domingo find out in their report "Women and power: Overcoming barriers to leadership and influence" that around the world, women now have more decision-making power and influence, over more aspects of social, political and economic life, than ever before. The first election of women to local government in Saudi Arabia in December 2015 shows that progress is being made even in the most conservative societies. Nevertheless, progress is uneven both across and within regions and countries, and resistance and backlash are common (9).

Historically, the public-private divide served as an argument against women's right to vote, on the grounds that suffrage for women would disturb the balance between the public and private spheres (Pateman 994). Farida Jalalzai and Mona Lena Krook state in their article "Beyond Hillary and Benazir: Women's

Political Leadership Worldwide” that while it has been muted over time, this divide continues to manifest itself to the present day, albeit in different ways across cultural contexts, through elite and media scrutiny of the husbands and children of female aspirants, as well as largely unsubstantiated concerns about the broader “qualifications” of female candidates. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that women constitute a relatively small proportion of elected officials worldwide, at the same time that increases in their numbers may portend significant shifts in the gendered nature of the public sphere (6).

Linda K Richter documents in *Exploring Theories of Female Leadership in South and Southeast Asia* that with regard to gender, it is worth exploring why countries so long associated with patriarchy and the subordination of women should be the focus for so many politically prominent females. This subject seemed particularly germane in 1990. At that point, there was every prospect that the most famous Asian female leaders might soon be gone from the political landscape: A pregnant Benazir Bhutto barely survived a vote of confidence in Pakistan in December, 1989 before being unceremoniously replaced by Pakistan’s president in August, 1990. A charismatic Burmese expatriate, Aung San Suu Kyi languished under house arrest, ineligible to contest elections that she almost certainly would have won. Her party, despite her absence, won the elections, but it is unclear whether the military government will honor the results. And in the Philippines a beleaguered Corazon Aquino survived a sixth coup attempt against her, but only with U.S. air support (524-525).

1.1. Muslim Women Political Leaders: A Success Story

Abby Rolland confirms in his article “Muslim Women Political Leaders and Electoral Participation in Muslim-Majority Countries” that it is surprising to consider that Muslim-majority countries such as Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Senegal, Bangladesh, Turkey, Indonesia, and Pakistan have all had female political leaders at the highest levels of government (98). Tansu Çiller was the 30th Prime Minister of Turkey (1993-1996), and led the Conservative True Path Party (DYP). She served as Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey and as Minister of Foreign Affairs (1991).

In this regard, Clinton Bennett points out in her book *Muslim Women of Power: Gender, Politics and Culture in Islam* that Megawati Sukarnoputri is an Indonesian politician who was the fifth president of Indonesia (2001–04). Moving to Africa, Mame Madior Boye was born in 1940 and educated as a lawyer (250). Following the victory of Abdoulaye Wade in the 2000 presidential election, Boye became Minister of Justice in April 2000. Boye was appointed by Wade as Prime Minister of Senegal (2001-2002).

Atifete Jahjaga is the fourth President of Kosovo (2011-2016), she is the youngest to ever be elected to the position. Born in 1975, she graduated from the faculty of Law in 2000. Before going into politics, she worked in the Kosovo police force, progressing her way up to the rank of Major General (Kandiyoti 133). Roza Otunbayeva was sworn in as President of Kyrgyzstan (2010 -2011) after acting as interim leader following the 2010 April revolution that deposed President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Sheikh Hasina Wazed is a Bengali politician and leader of the Awami League political party, sworn into office for the second time in 2009, Sheikh Hasina is the current Prime Minister of

Bangladesh, having previously served in the role from 1996 to 2001 (Kandiyoti 302).

Benazir Bhutto was elected the first ever female Prime Minister of a Muslim nation (Pakistan) on December 1, 1988. Bhutto was defeated in the 1990 election, she continued to be a prominent focus of opposition discontent, and won a further election in 1993, but was replaced in 1996. Unfortunately, Bhutto was assassinated on December 27, 2007 (qtd.in Clinton 37).

2. Women as National Leaders

Historically, female national leaders have been rare (Jackson 321). The first woman to enter a position of national leadership who was not a monarch was Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who became prime minister of Sri Lanka in 1960. Later in the same decade, two other prominent women, Indira Gandhi of India and Golda Meir of Israel, also rose to power as prime ministers. However, it was not until 1974 that Isabel Peron of Argentina became the first female president. In general, the progress in the early decades was slow: three women became national leaders in the 1960s, followed by six in the 1970s, and seven in the 1980s. In contrast, dramatic change began to occur in more recent decades: 26 women first obtained positions of top executive leadership in the 1990s, followed by 29 additional women through August 2009. In other words, the number of new female leaders nearly quadrupled between the 1980s and 1990s and this pattern was repeated again in the 2000s. As such, more than three-quarters of all female presidents and prime ministers have come to office in the years since 1990. These findings indicate that the growing number of women in executive posts is no illusion or artifact of media coverage; rather, more women are entering these positions than ever before (qtd. in Jalalzai and Krook 7).

In total, 71 women from 52 countries have joined the elite ranks of female national leaders between 1960 and 2009 (Pew Research Centre 2014). This figure includes those women who have served on a temporary basis, for example as acting or interim leaders. However, it excludes those who have occupied positions that do not conform to presidential or prime ministerial office and in countries that are not politically autonomous. This overview reveals that these women in positions of executive leadership hail from geographically diverse locations. While the largest proportion is from Europe, other world regions also have large numbers of female leaders. Presently, 16 of these women occupy political office: nine presidents and seven prime ministers (Centre of American Women and Politics 2010). Together, they head countries in five regions: Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, and Oceania. To date, most research on female national leaders has focused on the details of individual women's political careers (Genovese et al. 84).

As such, comparative work on this topic is relatively sparse. Reviewing the literature, however, it is possible to make several observations with regard to these women's paths to power. What is perhaps most striking is that, contrary to many expectations, women have tended to become presidents and prime ministers in contexts where women's status lags far behind that of men in the educational and economic spheres, and in places where women face numerous constraints on their political and social participation. In fact, the only quantitative study on this topic finds a correlation between the presence of a female head of state or government and lower levels of parity of women to men in life expectancy, education, and income (Jalalzai 29).

Yet, at the same time, the women who accede to these positions are usually highly educated and considerably more privileged than women in the general population. Consequently, it is simplistic to assert that the education and economic status of women are not relevant to their political advancement. It is crucial for those who eventually rise to positions of national prominence, but this can be and has been achieved where women's overall status is low (Devika and Thampi 77).

Attempts to reconcile the paradox of female leaders in contexts in which women generally power have pointed to the importance of kinship ties as a path to office (Hodson 197). Women's leadership in certain regions is largely limited to those with familial ties marriage or blood connections to former executives or opposition leaders, many of whom assassinated. In these cases, kinship ties are primary but gender continues to be salient women's election or appointment to office. There are compelling reasons why a woman appears to be a more appropriate heir to political power. For example, a woman may not independently politically ambitious and therefore as easily pushed aside by male leaders to office (Col 1993). Alternatively, because women are often viewed as unifiers of the way they may be charged with the daunting task of uniting their country following a period conflict (Saint-Germain 173). Providing unity is especially important given that a contributing factor to women's rule of these contexts is high levels of political instability and a lack of political institutionalization, benefiting select women in their pursuit of power (Jalalzai 207).

3. Political Representation of Algerian Women

During the French occupation of Algeria, Algerian women's political participation was strong and effective. Women stood

hand in hand along with men to force out the French colonial presence in Algeria. Djamila Bouhired was one of those great nationalist women who had taken an active part in the Algerian revolution. She is considered the first Arab militant woman. The 1962 constitution established numerous liberties, including the right of women to vote in national elections. Algeria was the only country of the Arab region to renew the membership of its legislature in 2017.

A pioneer in the region, Algeria has transformed its political system through successive electoral reforms, including a move to a multi-party system in 1989, and the introduction of a legislative gender quota in 2012. From 2002 to 2012, the percentage of women in elected assemblies increased dramatically. In 2012, Algerian women occupied 32 percent of parliamentary seats, placing the country 26th worldwide and first in the Arab world. The electoral system too plays a significant part in women's election to parliament. In this system, the electorate casts votes for a party, in some cases also for individuals, with seats in parliament allotted in proportion to the votes each party receives (Rohloff 9) .

Mounzer AL Shater states in his article "Female Participation in Politics in Algeria" that this system provides an incentive for parties to broaden their appeal by adding women to their party lists. Proportional representation is also the best system for the enforcement of quotas. In the 2017 elections, the Algerian National Front party presented the country's first all-female parliamentary electoral list, full of women academics, managers, and public administrators. While no other elections were held in the Arab States, groundbreaking gender-sensitive law reform swept through the region. Hence, Algerian women entered

political life to various municipal councils in addition to ministerial posts and other governmental positions (66).

4. Challenges encountering Women to win elected office

Women operate under special circumstances in pursuing a political career. Women are less likely than men to obtain political office throughout the world; and the higher the office, the less likely they are to obtain it. Most explanations for the underrepresentation of women emphasize conditions associated with women candidates and prospective candidates rather than with discriminatory voting among the public (Bledsoe and Herring 213).

4.1. Institutional Barriers

The institutional barriers to political ambition entail the numerous male-dominated institutions that help candidates run for office by launching successful campaigns and providing great support (Lawless and Fox 11). These embody an “ethos of masculinity.” State legislatures have taken a long time to include women and the policies that they typically support. Political parties have not yet fully integrated women. Even though women have about equivalent campaign fundraising receipts, men are still more likely than women to participate in political fundraising networks (Lawless and Fox 25).

Other explanations focus on women role models as a crucial component of the political context in which women run for office as candidates. As Burns, Schlozman, and Verba point out, the

public initially views politics as purely a “man’s game.” Once women are elected to political office, however, and even at the earlier stage when women run as candidates for political office, inclusion as role models transforms politics into a “woman’s game”.

Another explanation for low rates of elected office holding by women highlights the roles of gatekeepers in determining who can successfully run for public office (Salvatore 92). Much of the research on why more women do not hold elected office, however, ignores the prior selection phase of office seeking. In that prior selection process, many potential women candidates may be discouraged from even entering the primary election nominating contest.

4.2. Campaign Funding

Generally, when money dominates politics, women lose out. With women having persistently lower incomes for many reasons (gender gap in pay, occupational segregation, disproportionate unpaid family care, frequent unwillingness to face the social consequences of pushing for higher salaries or promotions (Bowler 200) and with social and business interaction proceeding heavily along gendered lines, women are far less likely than men to be in the social and business networks that pour money into political campaigns. Combine a lack of public funding for campaigns in the U.S. and many other parts in the world with, at the very least, careful fundraising and spending limits and women are at a decided disadvantage as candidates (Clinton 13).

4.3. Socio-cultural Barriers

The socio-cultural explanation centers on traditional family role orientations (Lawless and Fox 9). This means that women are still required to fit into gender-specific family roles and continue to hold the responsibility for childcare and the majority of household labor. When they have professional lives, they face a much more complicated balancing act of these different responsibilities than do their male counterparts. A political career would amount to a third job for many women, due to the traditional division of household labor and family responsibilities. A study of two-career families in developed countries, conducted in 1995 by the UN, found that women still complete almost three times as much of the unpaid household labor as men (Ferree 60).

4.4. Stereotypes

Voters attribute stereotypical maternal traits to women, including women candidates running for political office. From a policy feedback perspective, therefore, when the state adopts policies representing the maternal traits associated with women, those policies assign a political meaning to maternalism that locates women not only in the private sphere of the home but also in the public sphere of the state itself (McDonagh 71). The result is to increase both the public's view of women as suitable political leaders and the percentage of women actually elected to political office.

4.5. Care Giving and Women's Choices

Balancing work and family responsibilities is one of the most challenging obstacles for women seeking leadership positions (Elshtain 73), and it can be especially daunting for the millions of working women raising children on their own (Goetz 65). Women are usually the primary, if not the only, parent caring for children and other family members during their peak years in the workforce. They are more likely than men to work irregularly and spend time out of the workforce (Jalalzai and Krook 42), and they are more likely to work part time (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). They also take more time off for family commitments than men do (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Differences in women's and men's earnings also contribute to the leadership gap. When two parents are in the workforce and one has an option to reduce or even leave employment, the higher-paid spouse is likely to continue working. That person is still most often a man.

4.6. Barriers and Bias

The gender imbalance in leadership is both a women's issue and a men's issue. Being a leader is not inherently valuable or desirable. Leadership roles can be time consuming and often require great responsibility, which can cause a great deal of stress and leave little room for other priorities. Just as the status quo is holding women back from leadership roles, it is holding men back from embracing caretaking and support roles (Takash 250).

4.7. The Absence of Political Ambition

In their book, *It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*, Lawless and Fox have conducted groundbreaking research to understand why some people consider running for office and others do not. What their research reveals is that women's underrepresentation in office is due in large part to the fact that women are much less likely to be politically ambitious than are men. In an engaging, well-written, and thorough examination, these authors explore the causes of political ambition for men and women, and their findings reveal important and, in some cases, surprising results. The first step to office holding is the desire to seek public office. Typically, studies of political ambition have focused on understanding the ambition of those who have entered a campaign or won office. However, these studies have missed those who could have run for office but never considered doing so (Kittilson 354).

4.8. Psychological Barriers

The psychological explanation for underrepresentation focuses on studies in socialization and psychological development. It also includes discussion of the “gendered psyche, a deeply embedded imprint that propels men into politics, but relegates women to the electoral arena’s periphery” (Lawless and Fox 12). Contemporary scholars in this field find that significant gender differences exist in confidence levels, the drive for achievement, and the proclivity to self-promote. Cynthia Enloe’s arguments in her book *The Curious Feminist* that patriarchy asserts that the reason why male-dominated institutions endure is because women do not even realize they are marginalized from the public sphere. These very same institutions work to make women feel “secured, protected, and valued” (6).

In a study about work-family gender ideologies, Davis and Pearce claim in their book *Adolescents' Work-Family Gender Ideologies and Educational Expectations* that there is a self-perception difference, which “is arguably an internalization of gendered norms regarding ability and achievement, leading girls to be more likely to question themselves and their abilities than would boys. Valuing a “gender egalitarian” family structure would mean concentrating on an education and career, which will lead to high incomes, independence, or job flexibility for both men and women. The central finding of their study is that the more gender egalitarian households ninth and tenth graders grow up in, the more education they are expected to attain (198).

4.9. Media Coverage

Norris and Lovenduski found that female candidates were covered by the media differently from male candidates. They received less overall coverage and the focus was more on their visibility as candidates rather than their stand on the issues (89). Kropf and Boiney, reported studies showing that the print news media cover women differently in ways that diminish their viability as legitimate candidates (419). In the political realm, rigid stereotypes about women and political leadership often captured in biased media coverage of female candidates can influence voters' perceptions of women candidates and discourage women from entering politics. Women leaders are still perceived as masculine and are sometimes negatively stereotyped (Bowler 201).

CONCLUSION

Certainly, women are active participants in politics. However, despite women's empowerment and accession into leadership roles, they do not yet have power commensurate with

their numbers. The principle of gender equality should be implemented in the political institutions. Besides, the increased representation of women should increase the overall level of democratic representation. It should nevertheless be noted that numbers do not tell the whole story. In order to ascertain whether or not a fairer gender balance has been achieved in terms of real power and representation, it is worth looking beyond the numbers. Although female representation in politics has been increasing in the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, it is happening at a very slow pace. Many influential leadership roles in different parts of the world's political institutions remain dominated by men.

Progress in women's empowerment and gender equality has proven to be most difficult in the inclusion of women's voices in politics and government. Important measures should be taken in order to lessen and reduce gender gap that exists at all levels of political offices and propose concrete steps for narrowing and, ultimately, eliminating them. Women make significant gains in representation and create a legislature in which the interests of all groups are better represented on all issues through introducing gender quotas, applying the proportional voting systems, multimember-districts, provide fundraising support to female candidates, more women must run, term limits for services in congress to ensure other perspectives and ideas can be included, greater emphasis on an inclusive educational system, influence of lobbyists, placing term limits on all elected political positions, and removing barriers for entry.

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