

Marginalization of Women in Political Representation

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Abstract:

Globally, women's political participation is still disproportionately low despite tremendous advancements in gender equality. Despite global efforts to promote gender equality, women face multiple challenges that hinder their entry within political arena. This paper explores the various obstacles that prevent women from fully participating in politics, such as socio cultural standards, financial limitations, educational inequalities, institutional bias, and violence. The study highlights both enduring issues and effective treatments, drawing on examples from a variety of nations, including Rwanda, India, the United States, and Sweden. These interconnected challenges collectively undermine women's political empowerment and weaken democratic inclusiveness. In order to strengthen women in political leadership, it ends by suggesting structural changes and tactics.

Keywords: gender equality, challenges, empowerment, and representation.

Introduction:

Despite being half of the world's population, women are still underrepresented in positions of political leadership, despite the fact that political involvement is essential to democracy. Women's political representation is a key indicator of a healthy and inclusive democracy. Despite constitutional guarantees, international commitments and the growing discourse on gender equality, political spaces remain largely male-dominated. The gap between men and women in political participation is shaped by complex interplay of socio-cultural reforms, economic barriers, institutional limitations and discriminatory practices that collectively restrict women's entry into and advancement within political life. Only over 26.5% of legislative seats worldwide are held by women as of 2024 (IPU). This disparity raises questions about how inclusive and equitable governing systems are. Women encounter structural barriers to equal political participation despite international commitments such the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This paper examines the obstacles that prevent women from participating in politics and uses examples from throughout the world to highlight these dynamics.

Women in National Parliaments- Global & Regional averages (IPU, averages as of Nov. 2025)

Sr. no.	Region/ Group	Lower Chamber%	Upper Chamber%	Total%
	Global Average	27.1	27.4	27.2
1	Americas	35.3	35.2	35.3

2	Caribbean	42.6	29.8	40.8
3	North America	37.6	44.3	39.0
4	South America	30.8	29.0	30.5
5	Central America	30.7	35.7	30.8
6	Europe	31.8	32.2	31.9
7	Nordic Countries	44.1	-	44.1
8	Western Europe	36.6	34.6	35.9
9	Southern Europe	29.3	39.8	31.3
10	Central & Eastern Europe	27.0	20.3	26.1
11	Sub-Saharan Africa	26.9	27.2	26.9
12	East Africa	32.6	30.0	32.3
13	Southern Africa	30.3	34.4	30.7
14	Central Africa	23.7	28.3	24.8
15	West Africa	18.9	15.5	18.5
16	Asia	21.8	22.8	21.9
17	Central Asia	27.6	24.3	26.9
18	East Asia	23.6	29.4	23.9
19	South-East Asia	23.5	20.8	23.2
20	South Asia	11.2	19.9	13.1
21	Pacific	21.3	49.5	24.3
22	Australia & New Zealand	45.8	56.6	48.1
23	Pacific Islands	7.7	13.3	7.9
24	Middle East & North Africa	18.8	10.5	16.9
25	Middle East	20.0	12.1	18.1
26	North Africa	17.0	7.8	15.0

(Numbers above are IPU regional averages for percentage of women seats in national parliaments) data.ipu.org

Socio-cultural Barrier: Socio-cultural barriers are among the biggest obstacles to women’s political representation. Women around the world face several deep-rooted obstacles that limit their participation and representation in political life. Gender roles are determined by profoundly embedded patriarchal conventions in many nations, which frequently confine women to the private realm. Women are deterred from pursuing careers in politics by these cultural norms. For example, women in India frequently encounter opposition from families and communities when they enter politics, even though the country's constitution guarantees equal rights. According to a 2021 study by the Centre for societal Research, female candidates in rural India were often expected to prioritize domestic duties (CSR) and experienced societal shame. Similar restrictions on women's mobility and public participation are found in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region due to conservative religious and cultural norms. Social

resistance is still strong even if nations like Saudi Arabia have implemented reforms, such as granting women the right to vote and run in local elections since 2015.

Economic Constraints: The substantial financial outlay needed for political campaigns is a barrier for many women who do not have access to resources. Limited access to financial resources restricts women's ability to contest elections, fund political campaigns, and engage in long-term political careers. Consequently, economic constraints not only hinder women's entry into politics but also undermine democratic inclusiveness and gender-equitable governance. Structural inequalities- such as lower employment rates, wage gaps and limited ownership of assets intensify women's financial vulnerability making it difficult for them to compete in a political arena that increasingly demands substantial monetary investments. Women are consistently at a disadvantage in Nigeria, a nation where political funding is largely marketed. The Women in Politics Forum (WIPF) claims that female candidates frequently lack the resources and networks of their male counterparts. Women's political chances in the US are also impacted by the gender pay gap and lack of financial independence. Women find it difficult to reach significant donors and fundraising networks, especially women of color, according to research from the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP).

Educational and Awareness Gaps: Women's ability to actively participate in politics is hampered by lower levels of education, particularly in developing nations. Limited access to formal education, political knowledge and civic awareness reduces women's confidence, leadership capacity and ability to engage effectively in political processes. Low literacy levels, lack of exposure to political training and restrict access to information marginalize women from decision-making spaces. Social norms that discourage women's participation in public discussions also deepen this gap. For instance, low female literacy rates in Afghanistan have undermined women's political empowerment due to decades of fighting and Taliban restrictions on girls' education. Despite the 2004 Afghan constitution's reservation of seats for women, their practical participation is still symbolic because of their lack of civic education and information. In contrast, some of the highest percentages of female political participation are seen in Nordic nations like Sweden and Finland, where women's educational achievement is comparable to that of males. The roughly 46% female representation in Sweden's Parliament (IPU) demonstrates the favorable relationship between political participation and education.

Institutional and Structural Barriers: Gender inclusion is sometimes resisted by male-dominated political structures. Women are often marginalized by gatekeepers, especially political parties. Structural limitations within political parties, electoral systems and government institutions often reinforce gender bias and restrict women's access to decision-making roles. Political parties frequently provide fewer opportunities, limited funding and inadequate leadership positions to women. Although mandatory gender quotas have been implemented in Mexico as a result of changes, women still encounter barriers within party organizations. Parties' manipulation of gender quotas is exemplified by reports of "Juanitas," or female candidates who resign after winning to be replaced by male substitutes (BBC News). Despite the existence of designated seats for women in Pakistan, political parties frequently propose women who lack independence or political experience, which perpetuates tokenism rather than true empowerment.

Gender-based Violence and Harassment: Gender-based violence, such as threats, online abuse, and physical intimidation, is a common occurrence for women in politics. Women aspiring to or engaged in political roles often face threats, intimidation, character assassination and physical violence which are used as tools to silence their voices and deter their participation. These hostile conditions create an

environment of fear, discourage potential women candidates and reinforce patriarchal norms that politics is a male domain. The lack of strong legal protections, inadequate reporting mechanisms and weak institutional responses further intensify this challenge. High levels of internet abuse have been recorded by female politicians in Brazil. During her 2018 candidacy for vice president, former congresswoman Manuela d'Átala got thousands of abusive threats every day (The Guardian). According to a 2022 study by the Federation of Women Lawyers, there were more than 200 instances of violence against female candidates in Kenya, ranging from physical assaults to verbal abuse (FIDA Kenya). Women are discouraged from running for office in such hostile situations.

Media Representations: Media representation plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions of political leadership, yet women face biased, limited and stereotypical portrayals that hinder their political representation. Instead of focusing on their policy competence and leadership abilities, media coverage frequently emphasizes women's appearance, personal lives, or emotional attributes, reinforcing gender stereotypes that undermine their credibility. Women politicians also receive significantly less media visibility compared to their male counterparts, reducing their public recognition and electoral prospects. Negative framing, sensationalism, and gendered scrutiny further discourage women from entering politics or sustaining political careers. According to an Australian survey, female politicians were more likely to be characterized by their personal life and attire than by their views or credentials (summers). The public's opinion of women as capable leaders is weakened by this type of coverage. On the other hand, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand received a lot of plaudits for her leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating that women's legitimacy in politics can be supported by balanced media exposure.

Lack of Mentorship and Networks: Informal political networks, which are crucial in determining careers, frequently exclude women. Strong networks and experienced mentors are essential for building leadership skills, accessing resources and navigating complex political environments; however, women are often excluded from these male-dominated spaces. This exclusion reduces their visibility, restricts access to campaign support and limits opportunities for capacity-building. The absence of role models and supportive mentors also weakens women's confidence and discourages long-term political engagements. As a result, women struggle to secure party nominations, mobilize resources, and advance to leadership positions. The "old boys' club" political system in South Korea makes it challenging for women to find mentorship or insider support. In patriarchal regimes, when political capital is mostly distributed among men, this is a frequent problem. On the other hand, initiatives like the EVE Program in Canada and EMILY's List in the United States offer mentorship, funding, and training to female candidates, helping to gradually increase the number of female candidates.

Legal and Policy Gaps: Existing electoral laws, party regulations and governance frameworks often fail to ensure equitable participation of women in political processes. In many countries, the absence of mandatory gender quotas, ineffective enforcement mechanisms, and loopholes in reservation policies restrict women's entry into decision-making positions. Additionally, weak institutional support- such as inadequate funding provisions, lack of gender sensitive training and insufficient measures against political violence further marginalizes women in electoral competition. While some nations have imposed gender quotas, many lack the political will or the means to enforce them. Less than 10% of the lower house of parliament in Japan is made up of women. While a 2018 law encourages gender parity in elections, it is mostly symbolic because there are no consequences for noncompliance (UN Women). Rwanda, on the other hand, is a prime example of the effectiveness of legal reform. The government

established a 30% quota for women in parliament following the 1994 genocide. Rwanda has the greatest percentage of women in the lower house in the world as of 2023—more than 60% (IPU). Critics counter that this accomplishment is accompanied by limited political liberties.

Conclusion:

Sustainable development and inclusive governance depend on women's political engagement. However, women face a wide range of difficulties all around the world, from institutional brutality and discrimination to socio-cultural resistance. Overcoming these obstacles requires a comprehensive and sustained effort that addresses both the visible and invisible barriers faced by women. Strengthening legal and policy frameworks, ensuring effective implementations of gender quotas, creating gender-sensitive institutional environments and promoting political capacity building are critical steps. Equally important are societal changes that challenge patriarchal attitudes enhance women's access to education and resources, and encourage family and community support for women leadership. Expanding women's political representation is not only a matter of gender justice but also a prerequisite for stronger democracies. Women's meaningful involvement in political decision-making leads to more inclusive policies, balanced governance and sustainable development. Ensuring that women have equal opportunities to participate and lead is therefore vital for building fair, democratic and progressive societies.

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