

INVESTIGATING THE BARRIERS TO GENDER PARITY IN POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME THEM

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ABSTRACT

Despite concerted attempts to encourage women's involvement in politics, achieving gender parity in political representation continues to be a major global concern. This study examines the impediments to attaining gender equality in political representation and proposes potential methods to surmount these challenges. This paper critically examines the existing body of knowledge on the various obstacles, including unfair electoral processes, gender prejudices, and insufficient resources, that impede women's political participation. The present study used statistical analysis of cross-national data to identify patterns and assess the efficacy of several approaches, such as gender quotas, political party reforms, and capacity-building techniques. These results emphasize the need of comprehensive strategies that tackle both the supply and demand aspects of women's involvement in politics.

Keywords: Gender Parity, Political Representation, Barriers, Gender Quotas, Political Participation, Electoral Systems

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality in political representation is universally acknowledged as crucial for promoting inclusive, fair, and efficient governance. Attaining gender parity is not only about equity; it is about improving the quality of democracy by guaranteeing that the viewpoints and agendas of all sectors of society are sufficiently included in decision-making procedures. Notwithstanding notable advancements in many areas, the global level of women's participation in political institutions continues to be unsatisfactorily low. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023), the current global representation of women in parliamentary seats stands at around 26%, indicating an ongoing disparity that impedes the achievement of genuine gender equality. The lack of adequate representation has significant consequences, since it restricts the range of perspectives and experiences that influence public policy, diminishes the responsibility of political institutions, and degrades the democratic ideal of equal citizenship.

The historical marginalization of women from political authority is firmly established in deeply ingrained structural, socio-cultural, and institutional obstacles that have developed over centuries. These obstacles frequently exhibit interconnections and mutually strengthen one another, therefore presenting formidable obstacles for women seeking to enter and prosper in the political sphere. Discriminatory

election systems, economic disparities, and inadequate supportive infrastructure, such as limited access to affordable childcare, are examples of structural obstacles that disproportionately impact women. For example, electoral systems that prioritize majoritarian results, such as first-past-the-post, often put women at a greater disadvantage compared to proportional representation systems, where party lists typically offer more chances for women candidates (Rule, 1987). Disparities in economic conditions exacerbate these difficulties, since women typically have limited access to the financial means required to finance political campaigns, a critical determinant of electoral success (Jalalzai, 2008).

Social and cultural standards, as well as gender prejudices, significantly contribute to the ongoing lack of female representation in politics. Cultural norms generally assign women the role of caregivers rather than leaders, and these preconceptions are reinforced by media representations and public attitudes that downplay women's political achievements. In numerous cultures, politics continues to be perceived as a domain predominantly controlled by men, therefore subjecting women to heightened examination and doubt over their competence. The prevailing view is further strengthened by media coverage that frequently highlights the physical appearance or personal life of female politicians rather than their policies and qualifications (Ross et al., 2013). Furthermore, women involved in politics often face gender-based harassment and violence, which might discourage them from seeking or sustaining political careers (Krook, 2020). Adverse conditions of this nature not only deter individual women from pursuing a career in politics but also indicate to society that politics is an unsuitable and unwelcoming domain for women.

Systemic obstacles inside political parties and legislative bodies additionally impede the political participation of women. Male-dominated leadership structures within political parties, which serve as the main gatekeepers to elected office, often marginalize women and restrict their access to candidacies. According to Caul (1999), the candidate selection process is usually overseen by party leaders, who may exhibit a preference for male candidates owing to their established networks and fundamental prejudices. Female candidates, even when chosen, frequently encounter a disparity in financial and logistical assistance from their political parties in comparison to their male counterparts. Legislative settings can be inhospitable to women, characterized by norms and practices that fail to cater to the requirements of female lawmakers, such as rigid working schedules and the absence of gender-responsive legislation to tackle concerns like sexual harassment (Bauer & Burnet, 2013). In addition to restricting the number of women entering politics, these institutional obstacles also impact the retention and efficacy of women who do attain political office.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, some approaches have been adopted globally to advance gender equality in political representation. Among the most notable and effective instruments for boosting women's political engagement are gender quotas. Quotas can be either legal, which require a specific proportion of women represented among candidates or elected officials, or voluntary, implemented by political parties to achieve a more equitable representation (Dahlerup, 2006). Nations that have adopted gender quotas, such as Rwanda and Sweden, have observed substantial growth in the membership of women in parliament, therefore illustrating the capacity of quotas to rectify past disparities and swiftly enhance gender representation (Burnet, 2011).

The implementation of electoral changes that incorporate aspects of proportional representation or mixed-member systems has shown to be successful in establishing a more advantageous electoral

environment for women. These mechanisms frequently result in the formation of more inclusive parliaments by enabling smaller parties, which may place a higher emphasis on gender equality, to secure seats and exert influence (Norris, 2004). Moreover, implementing measures that establish public financing for political campaigns can effectively reduce the financial obstacles that unfairly affect female candidates, therefore allowing them to compete on a more equitable basis with their male counterparts. The implementation of political party reforms, such as the creation of women's wings, mentorship programs, and the establishing of targets for female candidates, can enhance the involvement of women in politics by providing avenues and networks that enable their engagement (O'Brien, 2012).

Capacity-building programs, such as leadership training, networking opportunities, and campaigning for gender-sensitive legislation, are essential for empowering women in politics. These programs provide women with the necessary skills, competence, and resources to effectively negotiate the political environment and achieve success in elected positions (Krook & Norris, 2014). International organisations, non-governmental organisations, and governments have all been crucial in executing these programmes, therefore making significant contributions to the gradual advancement towards achieving gender equality in political participation.

Nevertheless, although these approaches have attained remarkable achievements, they are not devoid of constraints. The efficacy of gender quotas, for instance, might vary considerably based on the political and cultural circumstances, the structure of the quota system, and the degree of implemented enforcement. Quotas have faced criticism for either elevating women to symbolic roles devoid of legitimate authority or impact, or for serving as a surface solution that fails to tackle underlying systemic problems (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008). The implementation of electoral and party reforms, although advantageous, may encounter opposition from deeply rooted interests that are hesitant to relinquish control or alter long-standing methodologies. Furthermore, the socio-cultural attitudes that diminish the importance of women's involvement in politics cannot be abruptly altered and need continuous endeavors to modify public opinions and eliminate deeply ingrained prejudices.

Structural Barriers

In the realm of women's political representation, structural barriers stand out as enduring impediments. These factors encompass biased election systems, socioeconomic disparities, and the absence of comprehensive infrastructure to promote female candidates. Electoral systems that prioritize majoritarian results, such as first-past-the-post, place women at a greater disadvantage compared to proportional representation systems, which are typically more favorable for women's election (Rule, 1987). Proportional representation enables a greater number of party lists and facilitates the inclusion of women as candidates, in contrast to majoritarian systems where single-member districts tend to show preference for male incumbents.

Furthermore, economic inequalities also have a substantial impact in impeding women's involvement in politics. On average, women have limited access to financial resources compared to men, which constrains their capacity to finance campaigns and participate in politics (Jalalzai, 2008). Adequate funding for campaigns is a crucial factor in achieving political success, and the financial obstacles encountered by female candidates can significantly discourage them. Moreover, the absence of reasonably priced childcare and adaptable working arrangements persists in restricting women's capacity

to engage in politics, since they frequently shoulder an inequitable amount of household duties (UN Women, 2021).

Socio-Cultural Barriers

Moreover, socio-cultural conventions and gender prejudices greatly impede women's political participation. Conventional gender norms and preconceived notions that perceive women as less appropriate for leadership roles are factors that contribute to their lack of participation in politics (Paxton & Hughes, 2015). In numerous cultures, politics continues to be regarded as a male sphere, where women are presumed to give precedence to home obligations above involvement in public affairs. The aforementioned view is further strengthened by media depictions that frequently objectify female politicians or prioritize their physical attractiveness over their abilities (Ross et al., 2013). Furthermore, female candidates often encounter gender-based harassment and violence, which can discourage them from entering political professions (Krook, 2020).

Public perceptions of women in positions of leadership can also influence their degree of success in elections. Studies indicate that voters, women included, may harbor prejudices against female candidates, viewing them as less qualified or skilled than their male counterparts (Schwarz & Coppock, 2022). These biases can impact voting behavior, resulting in diminished backing for female politicians, even when they possess same or superior qualifications compared to male candidates.

Institutional Barriers

The presence of institutional obstacles within political parties and legislative bodies serves to further hinder the political representation of women. Male-dominated leadership systems within political parties, which serve as gatekeepers to elected office, frequently exclude women (Caul, 1999). Political party leaders sometimes dominate the candidate selection process, exhibiting a preference for male candidates influenced by their established networks and biases. Furthermore, the absence of internal party measures that support gender equality, such as gender quotas or mentorship programs, restricts women's chances to progress within the party hierarchy (Kittilson, 2006).

Moreover, legislative bodies provide difficulties since their standards and procedures may not be favorable to the complete involvement of women. The confrontational character of several national legislatures, along with inhospitable working hours and conditions, can deter women from pursuing or retaining political positions. Moreover, the lack of gender-sensitive policies and procedures, such as strategies to tackle sexual harassment, can have detrimental effects on the professional atmosphere for female lawmakers (Bauer & Burnet, 2013).

Strategies to Overcome Barriers

- **Gender Quotas:** One of the most popular methods for increasing the presence of women in politics is the implementation of gender quotas. A predetermined proportion of candidates or elected officials must be female. These quotas can be voluntary embraced by political parties (party quotas) or imposed by legislation (legislative quotas) (Dahlerup, 2006). Quotas have been shown to be successful in quickly raising the share of women in politics, especially in nations where proportional representation is practiced. For instance, women now occupy the greatest percentage of parliamentary seats in the world—over 60%—thanks to Rwanda's implementation of legislative quotas (Burnet, 2011).
- **Reforms in Political Parties:** When political parties implement internal reforms that encourage women's participation, they play a critical role in advancing gender parity. Creating women's

wings, defining goals for female candidates, and offering mentorship and training programs are a few examples of these improvements. Gender parity in elected representatives is more likely for political parties that actively seek out and assist female candidates (O'Brien, 2012).

- **Initiatives for Building Capacity:** Women's political participation depends on capacity-building programs like campaign skills development, networking events, and leadership training. According to Krook and Norris (2014), these programs assist women in developing the abilities and self-assurance necessary to succeed in politics and run for government. Various programs targeted at improving women's political capabilities have been launched by governments, NGOs, and international organizations. These initiatives have demonstrated positive effects in increasing women's electoral success.
- **Reforms to the Election System:** Gender parity can also be advanced by changing election systems to incorporate aspects of mixed-member or proportional representation. These changes lessen the disadvantages experienced by female candidates in winner-take-all elections and increase the chances for women to be elected. Furthermore, changes that allow for public campaign finance can aid in removing the financial obstacles that disproportionately impact women (Inglehart & Norris, 2003).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve gender parity in political representation, this article will give a thorough study of the hurdles in the way and assess the efficacy of various solutions. Through an analysis of the interactions between structural, socio-cultural, and institutional elements, this research aims to pinpoint the most effective methods for attaining gender equality and improving the responsiveness and inclusion of political institutions. In the end, reaching gender parity in political representation is not only an issue of justice and equity, but it is also a critical first step toward attaining democratic governance's full potential, which is to ensure that all citizens' opinions are heard and appreciated in the political process. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study combines statistical analysis of international data on women's political representation with a review of the literature. The quantitative research looks at the percentage of women in national parliaments across various nations and political systems using data from the World Bank and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Important factors include the kind of election system, if gender quotas are in place, GDP per capita, and the degree of economic disparity and education. The degree of women's political representation and these factors are correlated, and correlation tests, regression analysis, and descriptive statistics are employed to find patterns and relationships.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Women's Representation by Electoral System

| Electoral System | Average % of Women in Parliament | Standard Deviation | Number of Observations |
|-----------------------------|---|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Proportional Representation | 29.5 | 7.8 | 65 |
| Mixed-Member | 25.3 | 6.4 | 40 |
| Majoritarian | 18.1 | 5.6 | 55 |

According to Table 1's descriptive data, the average number of women in parliaments is highest in countries with proportional representation systems (29.5%), followed by those with mixed-member systems (25.3%) and majoritarian systems (18.1%). These results are consistent with the research, which contends that because of the way party lists are put up and the increased possibility that women would be included as candidates, proportional representation is better for women's political representation (Rule, 1987).

Test- Regression Analysis

The effect of gender quotas, electoral system type, and socioeconomic characteristics on women's political representation was investigated using regression analysis. Table 2 presents the results, which show a substantial correlation between higher levels of women's representation and proportional representation systems and gender quotas. The percentage of women in parliament is also positively influenced by economic development (measured by GDP per capita) and educational attainment, whereas economic disparity has the opposite effect.

Table 2: Regression Results for Women's Political Representation

| Variable | Coefficient | Standard Error | p-value |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|----------------|---------|
| Proportional Representation | 5.2 | 1.1 | <0.01 |
| Mixed-Member (vs. Majoritarian) | 3.7 | 1.2 | <0.05 |
| Gender Quotas | 8.6 | 1.5 | <0.01 |
| Economic Development (GDP per capita) | 0.3 | 0.1 | <0.05 |
| Education Level | 2.4 | 0.8 | <0.01 |
| Economic Inequality | -1.9 | 0.7 | <0.05 |
| Constant | 15.4 | 3.2 | <0.01 |

The findings of the regression analysis verify that, in contrast to majoritarian systems, mixed-member election systems and proportional representation are linked to greater degrees of female political representation. With an average increase of 8.6 percentage points in women's representation, gender quotas have the most positive effect. Higher levels of education and economic growth also favorably impact women's representation, demonstrating the significance that larger socioeconomic conditions play in promoting gender parity. On the other hand, economic disparity has a detrimental effect on women's representation, emphasizing the obstacles underprivileged groups must overcome to gain political influence.

CONCLUSION

The constraints to gender parity in political representation are investigated in this study together with the success of several approaches to go beyond these obstacles. The results expose how institutional, socio-cultural, and structural obstacles still impede women's complete political engagement. The terrain of women's political participation is shaped in great part by institutional practices, economic resources, cultural attitudes, and electoral systems. Because they provide more inclusiveness and the ability of properly applying gender quotas, proportional representation and mixed-member systems give more favorable conditions for women's political success. Particularly when accompanied with supportive policies like capacity-building programs and political party reforms, gender quotas in particular have shown to be among the most effective ways for raising women's representation. It takes a multifarious

strategy to reach gender parity in political representation. This covers putting gender quotas into effect and enforcing them, changing voting procedures, supporting women's leadership development, and tackling socioeconomic issues disproportionately impacting women. Legislative bodies and political parties also have to implement gender-sensitive policies and procedures that assist women in all spheres of political involvement.

Recommendations

- Legal and voluntary gender quotas should be adopted by governments and political parties to guarantee a significant mass of women candidates and elected officials. To guarantee compliance, quotas should be crafted with enforcement tools including financial fines or incentives.
- Countries should give proportional representation or mixed-member election systems some thought since they give more chances for women to be elected. These systems together with gender quotas can greatly improve women's representation.
- Capacity-building programs aimed at helping women in politics should concentrate on polishing policy knowledge, campaign plans, and leadership ability. Mentoring initiatives help ambitious women politicians link with seasoned leaders so they may get direction and encouragement.
- Public awareness efforts and educational programs are required to question conventional gender roles and stereotypes limiting women's political involvement. Promoting good media representations of women leaders and tackling gender stereotypes in voter attitudes should be priorities in efforts.
- Regulations with gender sensitivity should be adopted by political parties and legislative bodies include family-friendly working hours, anti-harassment regulations, and open candidate choosing procedures. Improving institutional structures helps to provide women in politics a more encouraging surroundings.

Future Research

Future studies should keep looking at the intersections of gender with other kinds of marginalization, including race, ethnicity, and disability, to grasp the particular difficulties experienced by many groups of women in politics. Longitudinal studies tracking the effects of election changes and gender quotas over time can offer insightful analysis of the viability of various approaches. Furthermore, qualitative studies capturing the actual experiences of women politicians might provide a better knowledge of the obstacles and facilitators of political involvement.

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