

Gender and Governance: A Global Perspective

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14585350

Abstract

This paper examines the role of women in governance from a global perspective, focusing on the progress, challenges, and impact of female leadership across political, economic, and social spheres. While women's representation in governance has increased significantly in recent decades, with women now holding 26% of parliamentary seats worldwide (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023), gender disparities in political power remain pervasive, especially in certain regions. The paper explores the factors that influence women's political participation, including cultural norms, legal frameworks, and economic barriers, and assesses how women in governance can shape more inclusive and effective policy outcomes. Through case studies from diverse regions, the study highlights the ongoing barriers to gender parity and argues for the need for structural reforms to promote equality in leadership. The findings underscore that advancing women's participation in governance is not only a matter of equity but also essential for improving the quality of governance globally.

Keywords: Gender, Governance, Women

Introduction

The role of women in governance has garnered increasing attention over the past few decades, reflecting broader societal changes in the pursuit of gender equality. Historically, women have been underrepresented in political leadership and decision-making positions, a disparity that persists despite significant advances in education, workforce participation, and legal rights. However, the 21st century has witnessed growing momentum toward closing this gap, with many nations making notable strides toward gender parity in political offices. The global picture, though, remains uneven, and women's participation in governance continues to face significant cultural, economic, and structural barriers.

As of 2023, women hold approximately 26% of the seats in national parliaments worldwide, a significant increase from just 11% in 1995 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). Similarly, the number of female heads of state has also seen growth, with women now leading 10 countries, including New Zealand, Denmark, and Finland (UN Women, 2023). Yet, these

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advancements are not universal, with some regions, particularly in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, continuing to see lower levels of female political participation.

Governance, in its various forms—whether political, corporate, or civic—affects every aspect of human life, from policy making to economic development and social justice. Women’s involvement in governance is not just a matter of equity, but one of efficiency, as diverse leadership teams have been shown to bring more comprehensive and inclusive perspectives to policy decisions. Research highlights that gender-balanced governance can lead to better outcomes in areas such as education, health, and social welfare (World Economic Forum, 2022).

This paper aims to explore the global landscape of women’s participation in governance, examining both the progress that has been made and the persistent challenges that hinder full gender equality in leadership. By analyzing case studies from different regions, this study provides a nuanced view of how cultural, political, and economic factors shape women’s pathways into governance, and how their presence in decision-making roles can contribute to more inclusive and effective governance systems.

Through this exploration, we hope to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic relationship between women and governance, offering insights into the policy changes needed to accelerate gender parity and enhance the quality of governance worldwide.

Why Presence of Women in Politics matters?

Women’s participation in governance is crucial for fostering more inclusive, balanced, and representative societies. When women have a voice at all levels of society and are able to contribute meaningfully to decisions that affect their lives, the broader community benefits from more equitable and effective governance. However, in many parts of the world, women still have limited control over decisions that impact them, whether within their households, local communities, or national political systems. Historically, women have been marginalized in patriarchal societies, where their voices have been silenced and their roles confined to subservient positions, often under the authority of male rulers. As a result, women are underrepresented in formal politics and decision-making processes, particularly in higher levels of government (UN Women, 2023). For women facing intersecting forms of discrimination—such as those living in poverty or belonging to minority ethnic, sexual, or disability groups—the situation is even more dire, as their voices are further silenced in both political and economic spheres.

Research consistently shows that women’s increased political participation leads to positive outcomes for governance. Women bring critical insights into community resources, are adept at managing budgets, and contribute to more inclusive and collaborative decision-making processes (World Bank, 2022). Furthermore, female leaders often prioritize issues that have a significant and direct impact on the welfare of the community, including healthcare, education, and poverty alleviation. The leadership qualities women possess—rooted in empathy, care, and a focus on long-term wellbeing—make them effective agents of change (UNDP, 2021). Today, a growing number of women are highly educated and professionally trained, capable of leading effectively and driving positive change in governance. Notable examples, such as companies

like PepsiCo and Yahoo, which have flourished under female leadership, provide strong evidence of the economic and organizational benefits of women at the helm (Catalyst, 2021).

The necessity of women's participation in governance is not only about achieving gender equity but also about realizing the broader goals of peace, security, and sustainable development. As former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton argued, "If we believe that human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights, then we cannot accept the ongoing marginalization of half the world's population" (Clinton, 2012). Nobel laureate Amartya Sen also underscores that the success of development in any society can be measured by how well it empowers women (Sen, 1999). Marginalizing women from political and decision-making processes leads to the ineffective allocation of resources and missed opportunities for development. In line with Swami Vivekananda's view that the progress of a nation can be gauged by its treatment of women, nations with greater female representation in public offices are more likely to enact policies that reflect the needs and priorities of families, women, and marginalized groups (Vivekananda, 1893).

Moreover, evidence demonstrates a strong correlation between the presence of women in political bodies and the gender-sensitivity of legislation. Women's involvement can also reduce corruption and ensure that policies address a more diverse range of issues (O'Reilly & Reed, 2020). The absence of women in governance inevitably results in policy decisions that do not fully reflect the realities and needs of the entire population, as men and women often perceive issues differently based on their unique life experiences. For example, strong women's movements are linked to more comprehensive policies on violence against women and the inclusion of women's issues in peace negotiations (UN Women, 2023). Additionally, women's political participation has been shown to have positive effects on child welfare, governance quality, and development priorities (World Bank, 2022).

Women's leadership also has a transformative effect on future generations. By providing role models, women in positions of power inspire younger generations and challenge traditional gender roles, thereby gradually shifting societal norms (UNICEF, 2021). Empowering women by supporting their active participation in governance and enhancing their social status can have ripple effects across multiple areas of society, including greater control over financial resources and property, which further amplifies their influence both in the household and in the broader community. Integrating women into governance is not only a matter of achieving justice but also of strengthening societal foundations. The growing body of evidence supporting the positive impacts of women in leadership roles emphasizes the need for continued efforts to ensure that women are given equal opportunities to participate in decision-making processes at all levels.

Recent trends in Women and Governance

The political participation of women has seen gradual progress over the years, yet significant disparities persist globally. As of January 1, 2023, women held 26.5% of parliamentary seats worldwide, reflecting a modest increase from previous years (UN Women, 2023).

In the United States, the 118th Congress, which convened in 2023, included 25 female senators, slightly below the record of 26 in the prior Congress (Pew Research Center, 2023).

Globally, women accounted for 22.8% of cabinet ministers as of January 1, 2023. Notably, Europe and North America had higher representations, with women constituting 31.6% of ministerial positions, while regions like the Middle East and North Africa lagged behind at 8.4% (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023).

At the local government level, data from 145 countries indicate that women make up 35.5% of elected members in local deliberative bodies. However, only two countries have achieved 50% representation, and an additional 26 countries have surpassed 40% (UN Women, 2023).

Despite these advancements, the pace of progress remains slow. The Global Gender Gap Report 2023 by the World Economic Forum estimates that, at the current rate, it will take 131 years to close the global gender gap across various sectors, including politics (World Economic Forum, 2023).

In India, women's representation in parliament has been a subject of ongoing discussion. As of 2023, women held 14.4% of the seats in the Lok Sabha (the lower house) and 11.6% in the Rajya Sabha (the upper house). While these figures show improvement over previous years, they remain below the global average, highlighting the need for continued efforts to enhance women's political participation in the country (UN Women India, 2023).

Beyond politics, women have made strides in leadership roles in the corporate world. As of 2023, women held 10.6% of CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies, marking an all-time high with 53 women leading major firms (Pew Research Center, 2023). Companies with robust Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs report better outcomes, with women constituting an average of 35% of leadership roles compared to 25% in companies with weaker DEI initiatives (DDI Global Leadership Forecast, 2023).

Analysis of Data

The data highlights ongoing gender disparities in political and leadership roles, revealing systemic inequalities that hinder women's full participation and representation. While progress is evident in certain regions and sectors, it remains uneven and slow globally. Examining this data provides insights into the structural barriers, cultural biases, and opportunities for transformative change.

The increase in women holding 26.5% of parliamentary seats worldwide (UN Women, 2023) reflects incremental progress. However, this figure falls significantly short of gender parity, which feminist perspectives identify as crucial for equitable policy-making. Women's underrepresentation in decision-making positions perpetuates male-dominated governance structures, limiting diverse perspectives and equitable outcomes.

The stark differences in women's political representation across regions (e.g., Europe and North America's 31.6% versus the Middle East and North Africa's 8.4%) underscore the impact of cultural, religious, and socio-political norms. Feminist analysis points to deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that resist women's inclusion, particularly in regions with restrictive gender roles. These disparities reveal the need for localized approaches to dismantling structural barriers.

Women's 35.5% representation in local elected bodies globally is a positive indicator of grassroots empowerment. Feminist theories often emphasize the importance of local governance as an entry point for women, allowing them to influence policies affecting their communities. However, the limited number of countries achieving 50% representation highlights the slow pace of systemic change.

The World Economic Forum's estimation that it will take 131 years to close the global gender gap (2023) reflects systemic failures to prioritize gender equity. Feminist critiques often challenge such timelines, arguing they normalize slow progress and reinforce complacency. Instead, they advocate for radical policy changes, such as gender quotas and transformative education, to accelerate parity.

India's lower-than-global-average representation of women in parliament (14.4% in the Lok Sabha, 11.6% in the Rajya Sabha) illustrates how intersectional factors, such as caste, class, and cultural norms, exacerbate gender disparities. A feminist lens highlights the compounded discrimination faced by marginalized women, calling for an intersectional approach to policymaking that addresses these layered inequities.

Women holding 10.6% of CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies (Pew Research Center, 2023) is a milestone but remains disproportionately low. Feminist critiques point to the "glass ceiling" and "sticky floor" phenomena that restrict women's upward mobility. The effectiveness of DEI programs in raising women's leadership participation underscores the need for institutional accountability and cultural shifts in workplaces.

Inferences Drawn from the Data

1. **Structural Barriers Persist:** The slow progress in achieving gender parity indicates the persistence of patriarchal systems that marginalize women. Feminist advocacy must continue to challenge these structures, including discriminatory laws, gender norms, and institutional biases.

2. **Importance of Quotas and Affirmative Action:** Countries and organizations that have implemented gender quotas or affirmative action policies (e.g., Rwanda) demonstrate higher levels of representation. Feminist perspectives advocate for these mechanisms as temporary but necessary tools to level the playing field.

3. **Intersectional Solutions Are Key:** The disparities between and within regions highlight the need for intersectional strategies that address overlapping forms of oppression, such as race, class, and religion.

4. **Grassroots Empowerment Is Crucial:** The relatively higher representation of women in local governance suggests that grassroots movements and localized interventions can be effective. Feminist movements must continue to empower women at the community level as a foundation for broader change.

5. **Cultural Change Is Imperative:** While policies and quotas can increase representation, sustainable progress requires shifting cultural attitudes and dismantling stereotypes that view leadership as a male domain. This cultural transformation must be supported by education and media representation.

Factors Responsible for Women's Dilapidated Conditions in Global Governance and Politics

Economic Factors Contributing to the Marginalization of Women in Global Politics

Economic factors play a crucial role in perpetuating the underrepresentation and marginalization of women in global politics. Women's economic status is deeply intertwined with their political power and access to leadership roles. In many countries, women remain disproportionately affected by poverty, with the global gender poverty gap estimated at 2.4 percentage points in 2021 (UN Women, 2021). Economic dependence, often a result of limited access to quality education, employment, and financial resources, hinders women's ability to participate in political life. For instance, women in developing regions are more likely to be employed in informal sectors, where job security and earnings are often low and unpredictable, limiting their ability to invest time or resources in political activities or campaigns (World Bank, 2022).

Moreover, the gender pay gap persists globally, with women earning, on average, 23% less than men for equivalent work (World Economic Forum, 2023). This wage disparity further compounds the challenges women face in financing political campaigns, which often require significant economic resources for visibility, outreach, and logistical support. The inability to access financial resources, coupled with the economic burdens of caregiving responsibilities, restricts women's capacity to engage in political roles, especially in competitive, high-stakes environments. Therefore, economic inequality serves as a major barrier to women's political engagement and leadership.

Social Factors Impeding Women's Political Participation

Social factors, including entrenched gender norms and expectations, significantly impede women's participation in global politics. In many societies, political leadership is still perceived as a male-dominated arena, with deeply rooted stereotypes regarding women's capabilities in positions of power. These cultural norms shape societal expectations, often relegating women to traditional roles as caregivers and homemakers rather than political leaders (Molyneux, 2021). Research has shown that women in many regions face significant social pressure to conform to these expectations, which deters them from pursuing public office (Bjarnegård, 2013).

Additionally, the lack of female role models in high-level political positions further perpetuates these social barriers. As of 2023, only 26.4% of national parliamentarians globally are women (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023), with many countries, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, seeing extremely low female representation. The underrepresentation of women in political offices sends a clear message to future generations that leadership is not a role typically occupied by women, reinforcing a cycle of social exclusion. Furthermore, the social stigma associated with women in politics, including negative portrayals of female leaders as overly ambitious or assertive, often dissuades potential candidates from pursuing a political career.

Cultural Barriers to Women's Political Empowerment

Cultural factors are also deeply entwined with the challenges women face in entering and succeeding in politics. In many cultures, women's political engagement is often seen as a threat to traditional values or the established social order. In some societies, cultural expectations about women's roles are so entrenched that women's political participation is not just discouraged but outright prohibited. For example, in certain patriarchal societies, women are not allowed to vote, let alone run for office, due to cultural and religious beliefs that restrict their public visibility and influence.

In countries such as Afghanistan, where the Taliban's return to power in 2021 led to a significant rollback of women's rights, cultural conservatism has effectively excluded women from the political sphere. Even in more liberal societies, cultural barriers persist, such as the underrepresentation of women from minority ethnic groups in Western democracies due to historical discrimination and exclusion. Data from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) highlights that women from ethnic minorities, indigenous groups, and rural areas are particularly marginalized in political processes, with their cultural identity often being a barrier to full participation in governance (UNDP, 2020).

Political Factors Hindering Women's Political Participation

The political landscape itself is another critical factor that hinders women's participation and representation. In many countries, the political environment is hostile to female candidates, with political structures and systems that are designed to favor men. This includes political party structures that are often male-dominated and fail to create pathways for women to enter politics (Paxton & Kunovich, 2003). The absence of supportive networks and mentorship opportunities further marginalizes women, especially in environments where informal male networks dominate political discourse and decision-making.

Institutional barriers also exacerbate gender inequality in politics. For example, political parties may fail to implement gender quotas or may only offer token representation, resulting in women being included in less influential positions. In countries with no gender quotas, such as the United States and Japan, women's representation in political offices is far lower than in countries with mandated quotas, such as Rwanda, which has the highest percentage of women in parliament globally, at 61.3% (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). The lack of political will to support gender parity in governance, coupled with an often male-centric political discourse, severely limits the scope for meaningful participation by women.

Moreover, political violence, harassment, and intimidation disproportionately affect female politicians. In regions like Latin America and South Asia, women in politics often face threats of violence, both physical and online, aimed at discrediting or silencing them. According to a 2021 report by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 81% of female politicians have reported experiencing some form of psychological violence, such as online harassment, while 35% have faced physical threats (IPU, 2021). This creates a hostile environment for women, further discouraging their entry into politics.

The marginalization of women in global politics is not a product of a single factor but the result of a complex interplay of economic, social, cultural, and political barriers. Economically, women's lower earning power and financial dependency limit their political engagement. Socially, deep-seated gender norms and the lack of female role models perpetuate

the perception that politics is a male-dominated field. Culturally, restrictive beliefs about women's roles in public life further hinder their ability to participate. Politically, institutionalized sexism and the hostile environment created by political parties, quotas, and political violence discourage women from running for office and achieving meaningful representation.

The path to achieving gender parity in politics requires addressing these factors through comprehensive policies that include economic empowerment, social transformation, cultural change, and institutional reforms. Only by dismantling these barriers can societies fully harness the potential of women in governance and ensure more inclusive, equitable, and representative political systems.

Suggestions for Advancing Women's Participation in Global Governance

Addressing the underrepresentation and marginalization of women in global politics requires a multifaceted approach that tackles economic, social, cultural, and political barriers. While significant strides have been made in some regions, there remains a substantial gap in achieving gender parity in governance. This section outlines key strategies and recommendations to promote women's participation in politics and governance globally. These suggestions are grounded in empirical evidence and draw upon successful practices from countries and institutions that have made notable progress in advancing women's political rights.

1. Implementing Gender Quotas and Legal Reforms

One of the most effective strategies for increasing women's representation in politics is the introduction and enforcement of gender quotas. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023), countries with gender quotas, such as Rwanda, have seen transformative increases in female political representation. Rwanda, which has the highest percentage of women in parliament globally at 61.3%, provides a compelling case for the efficacy of quotas in achieving gender balance (IPU, 2023). Evidence from the Nordic countries also suggests that quotas not only improve numerical representation but also enhance the quality of women's political participation by normalizing women in leadership roles (Dahlerup, 2020).

Legal reforms that mandate gender parity in political candidate lists or within political parties can encourage political parties to prioritize women's candidacies. Such reforms can address the systemic barriers that prevent women from gaining political power in male-dominated systems. For example, the use of "zebra" lists (alternating male and female candidates) in countries like France has proven effective in increasing women's representation at the national level (O'Brien & Rickne, 2020). Therefore, a global push for the adoption of gender quotas and legal frameworks that ensure women's representation is critical in closing the gender gap in governance.

2. Promoting Economic Empowerment and Access to Resources

Economic independence is essential for women to fully engage in politics. As highlighted in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2023), economic disparities between men and women remain a significant barrier to women's political participation, as women often lack the resources needed to fund campaigns or access political

networks. To address this, governments should implement policies that promote women's economic empowerment, such as increasing access to credit, property rights, and equal pay for equal work.

Programs that encourage women's entrepreneurship can also serve as stepping stones to greater political engagement. Research has shown that economically empowered women are more likely to run for office and engage in political activism (World Bank, 2022). Additionally, providing women with training in financial literacy and leadership skills can help them overcome the economic challenges of political campaigning. Supporting female candidates through campaign finance reforms, such as public funding for campaigns or financial incentives for political parties that run female candidates, would also contribute to leveling the playing field.

3. Challenging Social Norms and Stereotypes

Social norms and gender stereotypes are among the most persistent barriers to women's participation in governance. A 2021 survey by UN Women found that 60% of respondents in some regions believed that political leadership was a male-dominated sphere, which discourages women from pursuing leadership positions (UN Women, 2021). To challenge these ingrained beliefs, there needs to be a concerted effort to reframe the narrative around women in politics. Educational campaigns that highlight the successes of women leaders, both in local and global contexts, can serve as powerful tools to shift public perceptions.

Media plays a crucial role in shaping societal attitudes, and governments and civil society organizations should collaborate with media outlets to promote positive portrayals of women in leadership. Research shows that exposure to female political role models increases young women's aspirations and participation in politics (UNICEF, 2021). Additionally, schools and universities can integrate gender equality curricula to foster more inclusive views of leadership from an early age, challenging traditional gender roles.

4. Enhancing Women's Safety and Combating Political Violence

Political violence, including online harassment, physical threats, and gender-based violence, remains a significant deterrent to women's political participation. The IPU (2021) reports that 81% of female politicians globally have experienced some form of violence or harassment, with many facing threats simply for occupying leadership positions. This violence is particularly pronounced in regions with high levels of political instability, such as Latin America and South Asia. To address this, governments must strengthen legal frameworks that protect women from political violence, both in the physical and digital spaces.

The establishment of safe spaces for women to engage in politics, free from intimidation and harassment, is critical. Support systems, such as legal assistance and counseling, should be made available to female politicians facing threats. Moreover, political parties should adopt internal mechanisms to address harassment and discrimination, ensuring that women can participate without fear of violence or retribution. International organizations, such as the United Nations, can play a key role in advocating for global norms and standards on the protection of women in politics, including sanctions for governments that fail to protect female political actors.

5. Building Strong Networks and Mentorship Programs

Building strong networks and mentorship opportunities is vital for empowering women in politics. Research consistently shows that women in politics often lack the informal networks that male politicians benefit from, which are critical for navigating the political landscape (Paxton & Kunovich, 2003). Establishing mentorship programs where experienced women politicians guide younger women can help bridge this gap. Such programs have been successful in countries like Sweden and Canada, where female mentors have helped increase the number of women in political office by providing advice, resources, and emotional support (Bjarnegård, 2013).

Additionally, fostering alliances among women's organizations can create a powerful collective force for change. Women's political movements that advocate for policy reforms, such as equal pay and reproductive rights, have proven effective in bringing attention to gender inequality and pushing for legislative change. A global network of women leaders, both in government and civil society, can also provide a platform for sharing best practices and coordinating efforts to advance women's rights.

Conclusion

To achieve meaningful gender parity in global politics, a holistic approach is required—one that combines legal reforms, economic empowerment, social transformation, and robust protection mechanisms. While progress has been made in some areas, the persistent barriers to women's political participation cannot be overlooked. By implementing gender quotas, empowering women economically, challenging social norms, ensuring safety, and building supportive networks, societies can create an environment where women are not only present but also thriving in positions of leadership. Only through such comprehensive strategies can we ensure that governance is truly inclusive, reflecting the diversity and needs of all citizens.

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