

Women and Politics: A Global Perspective

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Abstract: *The role of women in modern politics is a subject that needs further insight, considering the growth in number of women that nowadays have relevant political positions on the international stage. There are studies today that emphasize the equality issue and all that is gender role related, but our interest is to analyze the women representation in power related positions. This paper attempts to analyze the political status of women in world, identify internal and external conditions and factors that facilitate or hinder the creation of an enabling environment for women's political empowerment. The development context of women's political participation at the community and national levels will be reviewed for nuanced understanding of the nature of women's participation and their share in development processes and outcomes.*

Keywords: *Women representation, empowerment, equality, development.*

I. INTRODUCTION

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 exclusion of women from decision-making bodies limits the possibilities for entrenching the principles of democracy in a society, hindering economic development and discouraging the attainment of gender equality. If men monopolize the political process, passing laws which affect society at large, the decision-making process does not always balance the interests of the male and female populations. Women in government in the modern era are under-represented in most countries worldwide, in contrast to men. However, women are increasingly being politically elected to be heads of state and government. More than 20 countries currently have a woman holding office as the head of a national government, and the global participation rate of women in national-level parliaments is nearly 20%. A number of countries are exploring measures that may increase women's participation in government at all levels, from the local to the national.

At the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in September 1995, it was determined that women were not always receiving their share of the benefits of economic and political change. Evidence of that situation was women's under-representation in the executive and the legislature and at other decision-making levels of political participation. The lack of women's political participation was identified as a key barrier to genuine democracy

The Council of the Inter-Parliamentary Union later adopted the Universal Declaration on Democracy, which places special emphasis on greater partnership between men and women in politics with a view to more representative democracies. It also urged Governments and Parliaments throughout the world to be guided by its content.

Gender quotas and reservations have significantly improved women's political representation at national and local levels. Results are notable in Mongolia, Nepal, Timor-Leste, Afghanistan, New Caledonia and the non independent territories of French Polynesia. Political and post conflict transitions provide special opportunities to institutionalize quotas. The parity principle avoids the use of quotas and reservations to limit women's representation rather than to achieve equal representation.

Women's Representation at the National Political Level

Women's participation and access to formal political power structures vary across countries. There is a steady upward trend in women's political participation and representation in developed countries particularly in Nordic countries. Out of twelve countries where women representation in parliament is more than 33%, nine of them are ranked in the high human development category. According to the latest annual report of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) 2013 was a year of records for women's participation in parliaments worldwide. The percentage of parliamentary seats held by women globally rose to 21.8 percent, or an increase of 1.5 percentage points compared to the previous year.

No discussion of women's political empowerment is complete without consideration of the Nordic countries. Political scientists have stressed the role of state in the enhancement of women's political position in the Nordic countries. Data shows that the highest percentage of women in parliament is in the Nordic countries at 42.5% followed by America at 22.0%, Europe (including the Nordic Countries) at 21.1%, Europe

(excluding the Nordic Countries) at 19.5%, Asia at 18.4%, Sub-Saharan Africa at 18.0%, and the Pacific at 15.2% and the lowest in Arab states at 9.4%. (Fig: 1).

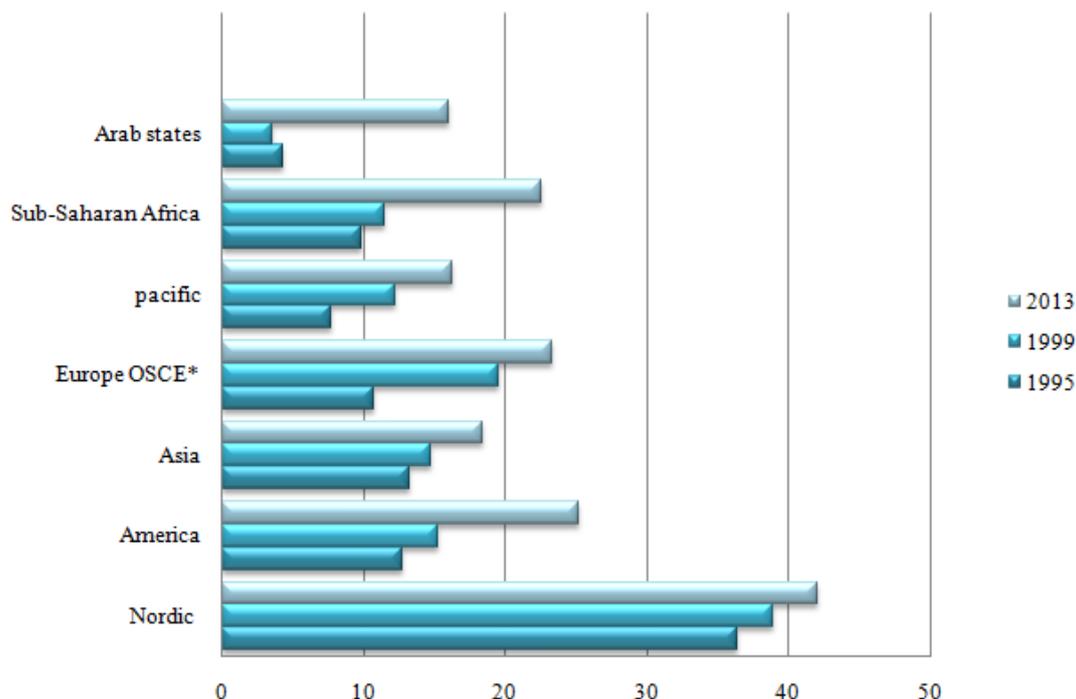


Figure1: Regional averages of women in parliaments, 1995 1999 and 2013 (Source: IPU)

Why Do We Need Women in Politics? What Difference Does It Make To Politics And Society In General?

In this paper of why women's representation is important four main arguments are brought forward.

- **The justice argument** claims that women have a right to half of the seats since they make up half of the population.
- **The experience argument** holds that women have different experiences, either biologically or socially constructed, that should be represented as well.
- **The interest argument** grants that women and men have conflicting interests and that these interests cannot be represented by men.
- **The symbolic argument** says that every female politician acts a role model for all women, regardless of political views or party membership and will attract other women to the political arena.
- **The critical mass argument** states that women are able to achieve solidarity of purpose to represent women's interests when they achieve certain levels of representation; and
- **The democracy argument** asserts that the equal representation of women and men enhances the democratization of governance in both transitional and consolidated democracies.

Moreover, Bari (2005) found that nine out of twelve countries where women hold more than 33 percent of the seats in parliament are ranked high in the human development category (girls are more likely to have access to education, lower illiteracy rates,) etc. Female representatives not only advance women's rights, but also advance the rights of children. In national legislatures, there is a notable trend of women advancing gender and family-friendly legislation. This advocacy has been seen in countries ranging from France, Sweden and the Netherlands, to South Africa, Rwanda, and Egypt. Furthermore, a number of studies from both industrialized and developed countries indicate that women in local government tend to advance social issues.

II. FACTORS HINDERING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

Women's historic exclusion from political structures and processes is the result of multiple structural, functional and personal factors that vary in different social contexts across countries. However, beyond these specificities of national and local contexts, there is a generic issue in women's political participation that relates to the wider context of national and international politics, liberal democracy and development. It is, therefore, imperative to critically review these constructs and decode the gendered nature of Democracy as well as Development, which poses limitations on women's effective political participation. Following are the factors hindering women's participation.

Ideological and Psychological Hindrances

The ideological and psychological hindrances for women in entering parliament include the following:

- Gender ideology, cultural patterns, and predetermined social roles assigned to women and men;
- Women's lack of the confidence to stand for election;
- Women's perception of politics as a 'dirty' game; and
- The way in which women are portrayed in the mass media

Political Factors

The nature of politics is an important factor for the inclusion or exclusion of women in politics. Vicky Randall defines politics as an "articulation, or working out of relationships within an already given power structure", which is in contrast with the traditional view of politics that defines it as an activity, a conscious, deliberate participation in the process by which resources are allocated among citizens. This conception of politics restricts political activity only in public arena and the private sphere of family life is rendered as apolitical. This public-private dichotomy in traditional definition of politics is used to exclude women from public political sphere and even when women are brought into politics they are entered as mothers and wives.

Male domination of politics, political parties and culture of formal political structures is another factor that hinders women's political participation. Often male dominated political parties have a male perspective on issues of national importance that disillusion women as their perspective is often ignored and not reflected in the politics of their parties. Also women are usually not elected at the position of power within party structures because of gender biases of male leadership. Meetings of councils or parliamentary sessions are held in odd timings conflicting with women's domestic responsibilities.

The larger democratic framework and level of democratization also impact women's political participation. Secular democracies in Europe and also in some of the developing countries have created relatively more space for women's participation in politics as compared to countries where religious orthodoxy has been shaping politics and democracy. Men dominate the political arena; men formulate the rules of the political game; and men define the standards for evaluation. The existence of this male dominated model results in women either rejecting politics altogether or rejecting male-style politics. Among the political obstacles that women face, the following feature prominently:

- The prevalence of the 'masculine model' of political life and of elected government bodies;
- Lack of party support, for example, limited financial support for women candidates, limited access to political networks, and the more stringent standards and qualifications applied to women;
- Lack of sustained contact and cooperation with other public organizations such as trade (labour) unions and women's groups;
- Lack of access to well-developed education and training systems for women's leadership in general, and for orienting young women towards political life; and
- The nature of the electoral system, which may or may not be favorable to women candidates.

Socio-Cultural Factors

The subordinate status of women vis-à-vis men is a universal phenomenon, though with a difference in the nature and extent of subordination across countries. Gender role ideology does not only create duality of femininity and masculinity, it also places them in hierarchal fashion in which female sex is generally valued less than male sex because of their socially ascribed roles in reproductive sphere. The gender status quo is maintained through low resource allocation to women's human development by the state, society and the family. This is reflected in the social indicators which reflect varying degrees of gender disparities in education, health, employment, ownership of productive resources and politics in all countries. Additionally gender is mediated through class, caste and ethnicity that structure access to resources and opportunities. The socio-cultural dependence of women is one of the key detrimental factors to their political participation in public political domain. Women also find it hard to participate in politics due to limited time available to them because of their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. With their primary roles as mothers and wives and competing domestic responsibilities and care work, they are left with little time to participate in politics.

In some of the countries, particularly in South Asia, women also face cultural constraints on their mobility. The mechanisms of sex segregation and *purdah* are used to restrict their mobility. Politics requires women's exposure to interact with male and female constituents and address public meeting.

Economic Factors

Politics is increasingly becoming commercialized. More and more money is needed to participate in politics. Women lack access to and ownership of productive resource, limiting the scope of their political work. In addition to lack of adequate financial resources, the socio-economic obstacles impacting on women's participation in parliament are:

- Illiteracy and limited access to education and choice of professions; and
- The dual burden of domestic tasks and professional obligations

Lack of Social Capital and Political Capacities

Women often lack social capital because they are often not head of communities, tribes or kinship groups, resulting in the absence of constituency base for them and means of political participation such as political skills, economic resources, education, training and access to information

Lack of Confidence

Lack of confidence is one of the main reasons for women's under-representation in formal political institutions, whether parliaments, ministries or political parties. With confidence and determination women can reach the highest levels in the political process. That is why women should believe in themselves and should do away with the widespread perception that men have to be their leaders. Women are equal to and have the same potential as men, but only they can fight for their rights. Women are very good campaigners, organizers and support mobilizers, but fear sometimes prevents women from contesting elections and from participating in political life

Balancing work and family

The work life balance is invariably more difficult for women as they are generally expected by society to act as the primary caregivers for children, as well as for maintenance of the home. Due to the demands of work-life balance, it is assumed that women would choose to delay political aspirations until their children are older. Institutional barriers may also pose as a hindrance for balancing a political career and family. Furthermore, mobility plays a crucial role in the work-family dynamic. Elected officials are usually required to commute long distances to and from their respective capital cities, which can thus be a deterrent for women seeking political office.

III. CONCLUSION

Summarizing all the above, it appears that the quantitative gender issue seems to be on the way of being resolved. There are more and more women nowadays that enter the political arena and, more importantly, maintain their position for a relevant period of time. The gender issues did not neglect the political environment and the policy-making procedures, and activist movement assured, not without consequences, a formal representation of Women's participation in politics leads to more complete insights of the needs of the population, and injects healthy competition and quality in citizen political participation generally. Yet, while gender equality is generally embodied in the law, the actual barriers and difficulties faced by women in politics are clear evidence that the principles of parity and equality in a democracy continue to be thwarted by well established sets of rules and practices which have been developed in the absence of women. These difficulties cannot, however, be solely blamed on men; women, too, may act against women's interests through being blinded by selfish interests and ambitions or overwhelmed by the divisiveness of politics. Women face numerous obstacles in achieving representation in governance. Their participation has been limited by the assumption that women's proper sphere is the "private" sphere. Whereas the "public" domain is one of political authority and contestation, the "private" realm is associated with the family and the home. By relegating women to the private sphere, their ability to enter the political arena is curtailed. The 20th century saw women gain access to political, economic and social rights. All these achievements are leading to important changes in women's lives but, while women have partly succeeded in combating discrimination based on gender, disparities still remain in many fields.

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