



E-ISSN: 2664-603X
P-ISSN: 2664-6021
IJPSG 2024; 6(2): 85-91
www.journalofpoliticalscience.com
Received: 05-05-2024
Accepted: 10-06-2024

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The representation of women in political leadership

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2024.v6.i2b.365>

Abstract

This paper explores the impact of different electoral systems - majoritarian, proportional representation (PR), and mixed systems - on democratic representation. Through a review of previous studies, it examines how each system influences inclusiveness, fairness in seat allocation, voter turnout, and the stability of political governance. Majoritarian systems are known for producing decisive and stable governments, though often at the cost of representing minority interests. Proportional representation systems ensure a more accurate reflection of voter preferences, leading to more inclusive and diverse political bodies, but they can result in fragmented legislatures. Mixed systems attempt to balance the strengths of both, offering a blend of proportional outcomes and direct local representation. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each system, contributing to ongoing debates about electoral reform and its implications for enhancing democratic processes.

Keywords: Electoral systems, majoritarian systems, proportional representation

Introduction

The representation of women in political leadership has become a significant topic of global concern, reflecting broader issues of gender equality, social justice, and the effective functioning of democratic governance. Women's participation in political decision-making processes is crucial for ensuring that the interests and perspectives of half the world's population are adequately represented. This study aims to explore the current state of women's political leadership, identify barriers to their participation, and analyze the effects of their involvement on political outcomes.

The struggle for women's political representation has been long and arduous. Women in most parts of the world were historically excluded from voting and holding public office, with political systems largely dominated by men. The suffrage movements of the 19th and 20th centuries were pivotal in advancing women's political rights. Notable milestones include the granting of voting rights to women in New Zealand in 1893, the ratification of the 19th Amendment in the United States in 1920, and similar victories across Europe and the developing world throughout the 20th century. Despite these gains, women have continued to face numerous challenges in securing leadership positions.

Main objective

The main objective of this paper is to critically analyze the impact of various electoral systems - namely, majoritarian, proportional representation, and mixed systems - on democratic representation.

Global Overview of Women's Political Representation

Women's political representation globally has seen gradual improvement over the past few decades, yet significant disparities persist across different regions and levels of government. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), as of October 2023, women held approximately 26.5% of parliamentary seats worldwide. This figure represents a modest increase from previous years but underscores the continued underrepresentation of women in political decision-making roles.

The global average masks considerable regional variations. For instance, the Nordic countries lead the world in gender parity within parliaments, with women occupying around 44% of legislative seats.

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This success is often attributed to proactive gender equality policies, robust welfare systems, and societal norms that support women's participation in public life. In contrast, regions like the Middle East and North Africa have lower

averages, with women holding about **17%** of parliamentary seats, reflecting entrenched patriarchal norms and legal barriers.

Table 1: Global overview of Women's political representation

Country	Percentage of Women in Parliament (%)	Gender Quotas	Type of Government
Rwanda	61.3	Yes	Parliamentary
Sweden	47	Yes	Parliamentary
Mexico	48.2	Yes	Federal
New Zealand	41	No	Parliamentary
India	14.4	Yes (local level)	Federal
United States	27.3	No	Federal
Japan	10.2	No	Parliamentary

Source by Author based on secondary data

Several studies and reports shed light on the factors influencing women's political representation. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) emphasizes the role of legislative quotas in increasing women's participation. Countries that have implemented gender quotas, such as Rwanda and Bolivia, have some of the highest percentages of women in parliament, with Rwanda reaching over 61% female representation in its lower house. These quotas can be mandated by constitutions or electoral laws, or adopted voluntarily by political parties.

Economic development also correlates with women's political representation. The World Bank's analysis indicates that higher levels of women's education and workforce participation often lead to greater political engagement. Education empowers women with the knowledge and skills necessary for leadership roles, while economic participation increases their visibility and networks within society.

Cultural attitudes significantly impact women's access to political positions. The World Values Survey reveals that in societies where traditional gender roles are prevalent, there is less acceptance of women in leadership roles. This cultural bias can deter women from running for office and influence voters' perceptions. Efforts to shift these attitudes are critical for long-term progress.

Electoral systems play a crucial role as well. Proportional representation systems tend to be more favorable to women's representation than majoritarian systems. Studies by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) show that proportional systems allow for more inclusive candidate lists, increasing the chances for women to be elected. In contrast, winner-takes-all systems often perpetuate the status quo, making it harder for newcomers, including women, to enter politics.

Political parties serve as gatekeepers to women's political participation. Research from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) indicates that parties often exhibit gender biases in candidate selection, campaign support, and leadership opportunities. Women frequently face challenges in securing party nominations, especially for winnable seats. Addressing these internal party dynamics is essential for enhancing women's political representation.

Violence and harassment against women in politics have emerged as significant barriers. The IPU's studies highlight that many women politicians experience threats, abuse, and violence, both online and offline, which can deter them from entering or continuing in politics. Legislative measures to protect women and promote safe environments are

necessary to address this issue.

At the local government level, women's representation varies widely. In some countries, women have higher participation rates at the local level due to decentralized governance structures and localized quotas. For example, India's constitutional amendments mandate that one-third of the seats in local councils (Panchayats) be reserved for women. Reports from the Ministry of Panchayati Raj in India show that this has led to over a million women serving as elected representatives at the grassroots level, enhancing local governance and service delivery.

International organizations and NGOs are actively working to improve women's political representation. Programs like UN Women's "Women's Leadership and Political Participation" initiative provide training, advocacy, and support networks for aspiring women leaders. These efforts aim to build capacity and overcome systemic barriers.

The impact of women's political representation extends beyond mere numbers. Studies from the World Economic Forum and academic research suggest that increased participation of women in politics leads to more inclusive policymaking, greater attention to social issues such as health care, education, and child welfare, and can enhance perceptions of legitimacy in democratic institutions

Factors Contributing to High Representation

Several factors contribute to high representation of women in political leadership, as demonstrated by studies, government reports, and data from international organizations. One of the most significant factors is the use of gender quotas, which have been shown to dramatically increase women's political participation. Countries that have implemented gender quotas, either constitutionally or through electoral laws, often see a higher percentage of women in parliamentary and local government positions. For instance, Rwanda, which introduced gender quotas in its post-genocide constitution, has the highest proportion of women in parliament globally, with women occupying over 61% of seats in the lower house. This success has been replicated in other countries, such as Bolivia, where women make up more than 53% of the national legislature, largely due to legislated gender quotas.

Electoral systems also play a crucial role in determining women's representation. Proportional representation (PR) systems are more conducive to gender parity in political leadership than majoritarian systems. Studies by International IDEA have shown that PR systems, which allow for multi-member constituencies, encourage parties to

field more diverse candidates, including women. In contrast, first-past-the-post systems often favor established male-dominated candidates, perpetuating gender imbalances. Countries with PR systems, such as Sweden and New Zealand, have consistently higher levels of women in parliament. In Sweden, for example, women hold nearly 47% of seats, supported by both the electoral system and party commitment to gender balance.

The commitment of political parties to gender equality is another critical factor. Political parties serve as gatekeepers to political office, and those that prioritize gender diversity in their candidate selection processes tend to have higher numbers of women in leadership. Research by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) highlights that when parties adopt voluntary gender quotas or promote internal reforms to encourage women's participation, the number of female candidates rises. Countries where parties have voluntarily embraced gender parity, such as Finland, where women hold 45% of parliamentary seats, demonstrate the power of party-level initiatives.

Cultural norms and societal attitudes toward gender roles also significantly influence women's political representation. In societies with more egalitarian views of gender, women are more likely to participate in politics. The World Values Survey data shows that in countries with strong gender equality norms, such as Iceland and Norway, women consistently occupy over 40% of parliamentary seats. In contrast, in regions where traditional gender roles prevail, such as parts of the Middle East and South Asia, women's representation remains low. Governments and civil society organizations in these regions have undertaken efforts to shift public perceptions, but entrenched attitudes remain a formidable barrier.

Economic empowerment and education are also closely linked to women's political participation. The World Bank reports that in countries where women are more economically active and have higher levels of education, they are more likely to run for and be elected to political office. Education provides women with the necessary skills and confidence to engage in public life, while economic empowerment increases their financial independence, allowing them to fund political campaigns and overcome economic barriers. Nordic countries, which have some of the highest levels of women's workforce participation and education, also lead in women's political representation, highlighting the intersection of economic and political empowerment.

The presence of role models and mentors has been identified as a key motivator for women to enter politics. When women see other women in positions of power, they are more likely to pursue political careers themselves. This phenomenon is supported by research from the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), which found that women who grew up in countries with visible female political leaders were more likely to run for office later in life. Countries like Germany and New Zealand, which have had prominent female leaders such as Angela Merkel and

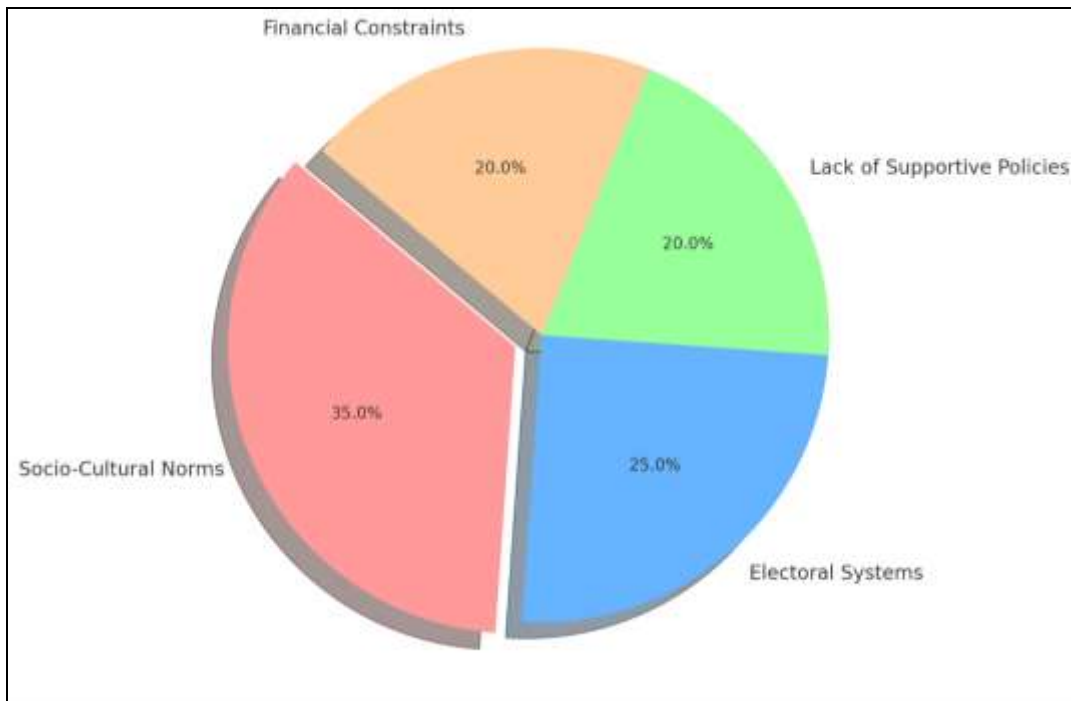
Jacinda Ardern, have witnessed growing numbers of women in political roles, illustrating the importance of visible female leadership.

Government initiatives and civil society programs aimed at empowering women have also been pivotal in increasing political representation. Programs such as UN Women's "Women's Leadership and Political Participation" initiative provide capacity-building, leadership training, and networking opportunities for aspiring women politicians. These programs, often supported by NGOs and international donors, address the structural and individual barriers that women face, such as lack of access to political networks or financial resources. For example, in Afghanistan, programs supported by USAID have trained thousands of women in leadership and political skills, contributing to an increase in female parliamentary representation to 27% in recent years. International advocacy and legal frameworks have further spurred countries to adopt measures promoting women's representation. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the UN in 1979, has been a cornerstone in pushing governments to take affirmative action on women's political participation. Many countries have incorporated the principles of CEDAW into national laws, enacting policies to ensure gender equality in political participation. Additionally, the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) set global targets for increasing women's participation in decision-making, galvanizing national governments to implement reforms. Countries that have committed to these international frameworks, such as South Africa and Argentina, have made substantial strides, with women holding 46% and 40% of seats in their respective parliaments.

Political violence and harassment against women, however, remain critical challenges in many parts of the world. A 2022 report by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) revealed that over 82% of women parliamentarians surveyed had experienced psychological violence, including sexist remarks, threats, and online harassment. These forms of violence create hostile environments that discourage women from entering or remaining in politics. Countries where political violence against women is prevalent often see lower levels of female political participation. Governments and international organizations are increasingly recognizing the need for stronger laws and protective measures to address this issue.

Barriers to Women's Political Leadership

Barriers to women's political leadership remain significant despite the progress made in increasing female representation globally. These barriers are multifaceted, rooted in structural, cultural, economic, and individual factors that prevent women from fully participating in political leadership roles. According to various studies and reports from governments and NGOs, these obstacles manifest in different ways across countries and regions, but the challenges are often deeply embedded in political systems and societal norms.



Source: By Author based on secondary data

Chart 1: Barriers to Women's Political Leadership

One of the primary barriers to women's political leadership is the structural bias within political institutions and parties. Research from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) highlights that political parties are often male-dominated, with men controlling key decision-making positions, such as candidate selection and resource allocation. This bias frequently results in women being excluded from leadership roles or given less favorable opportunities, such as being fielded in unwinnable constituencies. Party leadership positions, which serve as stepping stones to higher office, are typically reserved for men, limiting women's upward mobility in political careers. A report by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) indicates that in many countries, women are underrepresented in party leadership structures, with only 19% of party heads globally being female.

Another significant barrier is cultural attitudes and gender norms that frame leadership as a male domain. The World Values Survey reveals that in many parts of the world, deeply entrenched gender roles persist, discouraging women from pursuing leadership positions. In societies where patriarchal values dominate, women are often viewed as caregivers and homemakers rather than decision-makers in public life. This cultural bias is further reinforced by media portrayals and societal expectations that cast doubt on women's leadership capabilities. For example, a study by UN Women found that in countries where traditional gender norms are strong, voters are less likely to support female candidates, resulting in lower levels of female political representation. In regions like the Middle East and South Asia, these cultural barriers are particularly strong, contributing to the low percentage of women in parliamentary seats - ranging from 6% to 17%.

Economic inequality also plays a critical role in limiting women's political leadership. Running a political campaign requires significant financial resources, and women, on average, have less access to these resources compared to men. According to the World Economic Forum, women globally earn only 77 cents for every dollar earned by men,

and they own fewer assets, which puts them at a disadvantage when financing political campaigns. The World Bank notes that in many developing countries, women's economic participation is constrained by discriminatory laws and practices, further reducing their financial independence and ability to fund political endeavors. Women often rely on personal networks to raise campaign funds, but these networks are usually smaller and less influential than those available to men. This economic disparity becomes an insurmountable barrier for many women aspiring to political leadership.

Lack of access to political networks and mentorship also inhibits women from rising to leadership positions. Politics is often dominated by informal networks, or "old boys' clubs," that provide men with crucial opportunities for advancement, networking, and support. Women are frequently excluded from these networks, limiting their access to the political mentorship and connections necessary for leadership. A report by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) found that women politicians often face difficulties in accessing the same informal support systems as their male counterparts, which hinders their ability to advance within political parties and institutions. In many cases, women lack role models and mentors within the political sphere, further exacerbating the challenges of breaking into leadership roles.

Violence and harassment against women in politics is an increasingly recognized barrier to their leadership. The IPU's 2022 report on violence against women in politics showed that 82% of women parliamentarians surveyed had experienced psychological violence, including sexist remarks, death threats, and harassment, while 44% had received threats of physical harm. These forms of violence are used as tools to intimidate and silence women, discouraging them from pursuing or maintaining political leadership roles. Additionally, women politicians face online harassment and gender-based attacks, which further contribute to a hostile political environment. In extreme

cases, women have been physically attacked or even killed for participating in politics. These threats not only deter women from entering politics but also lead to high levels of stress and burnout for those already in leadership positions. The double burden of family and political life disproportionately affects women, creating additional barriers to their leadership. In most societies, women continue to bear the brunt of domestic responsibilities, including caregiving and household management. This "double burden" limits the time and energy women can devote to political careers, which are often time-intensive and demanding. A study by UNDP found that women politicians in developing countries frequently struggle to balance their family obligations with political work, leading to high attrition rates among female political leaders. Men, by contrast, are less likely to face such competing demands, allowing them to dedicate more time to advancing their political careers.

Educational disparities are another important barrier to women's political leadership, particularly in developing countries. While access to education for women has improved globally, significant gaps remain in certain regions, where women and girls are still less likely than men to receive formal education. Education is a crucial factor in developing the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed for political leadership. The World Bank reports that in countries with low levels of female education, such as in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, women are significantly underrepresented in political institutions. Conversely, in countries with higher levels of female education, such as the Nordic nations, women have a stronger presence in politics. Educational initiatives that focus on leadership development for women and girls are essential for overcoming this barrier.

Discriminatory legal frameworks and political systems can further hinder women's access to leadership. In some countries, laws still restrict women's rights to participate fully in political life. For example, until recently, women in Saudi Arabia were not allowed to vote or run for office. Even where legal barriers have been removed, political systems often remain unfriendly to women. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) has found that majoritarian electoral systems tend to disadvantage women, as they favor incumbents and established political figures, most of whom are men. Proportional representation systems, on the other hand, tend to produce higher numbers of women leaders, as they provide more opportunities for diverse candidates.

Media representation of women politicians can also act as a barrier to their leadership. Studies by UNESCO show that women in politics are often subject to sexist media coverage that emphasizes their appearance, personal lives, or perceived emotional qualities, rather than their political competence. This type of coverage reinforces negative stereotypes and undermines public perceptions of women as capable leaders. In many cases, women are held to higher standards than men and are scrutinized more harshly for mistakes or personal choices, deterring potential candidates from pursuing political careers.

The Impact of Women's Political Leadership

The impact of women's political leadership has been extensively studied, with numerous reports and studies

indicating that greater female representation in political offices leads to significant improvements in governance, policy-making, and societal outcomes. Women's participation in political leadership brings diverse perspectives to decision-making processes, influencing policies related to social welfare, economic development, peacebuilding, and democratic accountability. According to the World Bank and UN Women, increased female representation results in more inclusive governance and leads to policies that better address the needs of marginalized and vulnerable populations, particularly women and children.

One of the most prominent impacts of women in political leadership is their focus on social policies, especially in areas like healthcare, education, and family welfare. Studies from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) show that women legislators tend to prioritize issues that directly affect the well-being of families and communities. Countries with higher female political representation, such as the Nordic nations, are known for their robust social safety nets, including maternity leave, child care support, and gender equality initiatives. For example, in Norway, where women make up nearly 45% of the parliament, policies supporting gender equality, healthcare access, and education have been widely implemented. These policies have contributed to improved social outcomes, including higher life expectancies and lower child mortality rates.

Research from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) also highlights that women leaders are more likely to advocate for policies aimed at reducing poverty and inequality. A comparative study of countries with high female representation in parliament, such as Rwanda and Sweden, shows that these nations have implemented progressive taxation policies and social welfare programs aimed at reducing income inequality. In Rwanda, where women hold over 61% of parliamentary seats, social policies aimed at improving maternal health, access to education, and poverty reduction have seen remarkable success. The Rwandan government has significantly reduced maternal and child mortality rates, improved literacy rates, and enhanced social service delivery, largely due to the active role of women leaders in shaping these policies. Women's political leadership also plays a critical role in promoting peace and security. Studies conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have shown that women are instrumental in peacebuilding processes, often focusing on reconciliation and long-term stability. When women are involved in peace negotiations, research indicates that peace agreements are more likely to last. A 2015 study by the UN Women showed that peace agreements with women's involvement were 35% more likely to last at least 15 years. This is partly because women often bring a broader perspective to negotiations, prioritizing issues such as human rights, social justice, and community rebuilding, rather than focusing solely on military or political victories. In Colombia, for instance, women played a key role in the peace negotiations between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), resulting in a more inclusive peace agreement that emphasized gender equality and the protection of vulnerable populations.

Furthermore, women in political leadership are associated with lower levels of corruption and increased governmental transparency. A study by the World Economic Forum found

a positive correlation between higher levels of women's representation in government and lower levels of corruption. Countries with a greater proportion of women in political offices, such as Denmark and New Zealand, consistently rank among the least corrupt nations in the world. Women's leadership is often linked to a more ethical approach to governance, with research suggesting that women are less likely to engage in corrupt practices due to a greater focus on collaboration, fairness, and transparency. Reports from Transparency International also support this view, showing that women leaders are more likely to advocate for anti-corruption measures and transparency in government operations.

Increased female political leadership has also been shown to strengthen democratic processes. Studies by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) indicate that the presence of women in political institutions enhances the inclusivity of democratic systems. Women tend to introduce policies that encourage civic participation and create more equitable political processes. In India, where gender quotas have been implemented in local governments, the political engagement of women has increased significantly at the grassroots level. A report by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj in India shows that over a million women now serve as elected representatives in local village councils (Panchayats), bringing attention to issues such as water access, education, and healthcare that were previously neglected. This inclusion has resulted in better governance and more responsive local administrations, especially in rural and marginalized communities. Women's political leadership also leads to greater attention to environmental sustainability and climate change policies. Female leaders are more likely to support and implement policies that promote environmental protection and sustainable development. The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) has noted that women's participation in environmental decision-making leads to more comprehensive and effective climate policies. For instance, in countries like Costa Rica and Finland, where women hold significant political leadership roles, national climate strategies have prioritized renewable energy, biodiversity conservation, and climate resilience. In Finland, women leaders have been at the forefront of promoting green energy policies, contributing to the country's goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2035. Moreover, women's political representation has a positive impact on political stability and trust in government institutions. Research by the World Economic Forum indicates that citizens are more likely to trust governments that are inclusive and reflective of their populations. In countries with high levels of women's political participation, such as Iceland and Canada, there is generally higher public trust in political institutions and greater satisfaction with democratic governance. This increased trust is often attributed to women's focus on transparency, social justice, and inclusive policymaking, which resonates with a broad section of the population.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the representation of women in political leadership has proven to be essential for creating more inclusive, transparent, and effective governance systems. Despite ongoing barriers such as structural biases, cultural norms, economic disparities, and violence against women in

politics, the impact of female leadership is undeniable. Studies and reports consistently demonstrate that women's participation in political decision-making leads to improved social policies, enhanced focus on peace and security, reduced corruption, and stronger democratic processes. Countries with higher levels of women's representation in leadership have achieved significant progress in areas such as healthcare, education, and environmental sustainability, reinforcing the value of gender parity in governance. While progress has been made in some regions, much work remains to overcome the systemic obstacles that limit women's political leadership globally. Efforts by governments, NGOs, and international organizations are crucial in addressing these challenges and fostering environments where women can fully participate in political life. Promoting policies such as gender quotas, educational initiatives, and protections against political violence are key strategies for advancing women's leadership. Achieving gender equality in political representation is not only a matter of justice but also a critical factor in building more resilient, equitable, and prosperous societies.

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