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SAINT JOSEPH SEMINARY AND HIGH SCHOOL
in partnership with
RETORIKA FOR MULTICULTURALISM



UNWOMEN *RESEARCH REPORT*

Female Representation in Politics: Tackling the Underrepresentation and
Barriers Facing Women in Political Leadership.

Definitions:

Gender Parity:

A balanced representation of people of different genders in politics, economy, and public decision-making spaces. It's a measure, for instance, of the share of women holding parliamentary seats, ministerial positions etc.¹

Political Representation:

The incorporation of various constituents within political bodies and activities. Concerning women, this refers to both holding an office and the ability to uphold the adoption of policies on women advocacy.

Descriptive vs. Substantive Representation:

Descriptive representation focuses on the count of women holding political roles.

Substantive representation looks into the ways women political leaders drive policies that enhance equity, safe-guarding, and inclusiveness.

Gender Quotas:

Legislations that order or advocate for specific minimum proportions of women among holders of the office. They target the reduction of systematic marginalization and advocate for women's engagement in politics.²

Glass Ceiling:

The concealed obstacles which bar women from attaining the highest political offices. Such obstacles include biases, weak connections, pay gaps, inequitable division of unpaid work, and household obligations.³

Gender Mainstreaming:

Integrating a gender perspective into all politics and policymaking to ensure laws and governance mechanisms address women and men differently for a just outcome.⁴

Electoral Gender Gap:

Disparity between men and women in political participation, including voting, party activity, and running for office, reflecting unequal access in electoral systems.⁵

Patriarchy:

A social system in which men are thought to hold positions of power in both the public and private spheres. Women, on the other hand, are believed to be in less privileged positions and are oppressed by a patriarchal society.⁶

Suffrage:

The right to vote in electing public officials and adopting or rejecting proposed legislation.⁷

¹ <https://archive.unescwa.org/gender-parity>

² https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/thesaurus/terms/1304?language_content_entity=en

³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/glass%20ceiling>

⁴ https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/what-is-gender-mainstreaming?language_content_entity=en

⁵ <https://uselection.com.au/voter-demographics/understanding-gender-gaps-in-voting>

⁶ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/patriarchy>

⁷ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/suffrage>

Background:

Historically, the political exclusion of women has been deeply rooted in patriarchal regimes that denied them access to education, rights, society, and decision-making roles. However, large-scale political transitions altered this situation, during WWI and WWII women's efforts on the home front and in war industries demonstrated capability and changed public and political attitudes and weakened the argument that women were too fragile or uninterested for political life.⁸ During wartime, women undertook all sorts of traditionally male occupations, including factory work, nursing, and farming, and proved that they could undertake demanding roles and be crucial to the success of the nation. This service merited increased political appreciation and thus accounted for the grant of the right to vote for some women during or immediately after WWI, with further extensions following WWII. The service also strengthened the demand for political recognition and directly contributed to the extension of voting rights, with at least 24 European states introducing women's voting rights within six years of the end of WWII. In a similar fashion, the impact of World War II saw the global rise of politics of decolonization and the advent of countries seeking independence, which created new constitutions and led to the extension of voting suffrage⁹.

In addition, revolutions acted as accelerations of women's voting advances. In the case of Africa, the simultaneous termination of civil hostilities and the pressure of global political practices demanding the representation of women in governance also triggered the development of new constitutions that introduced women's suffrage through the quota system. However, there is a tendency in political parties, even those that belong to the progressive tradition, to act as essential "gatekeepers" ultimately facilitating women's access through the quota system and at the same time maintaining the masculine political and social control.¹⁰

Treaties and Organizations:**CEDAW:**

The CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) is an international legal instrument that requires countries to eliminate discrimination against women and girls in all areas and promotes women's and girls' equal rights. The Commission's work has been instrumental in bringing to light all the areas in which women are denied equality with men. These efforts for the advancement of women have resulted in several declarations and conventions, of which the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is the central and most comprehensive document.¹¹

IPU:

The IPU (Inter-Parliamentary Union) was established in 1889 and is the focal point for world-wide parliamentary dialogue, working for peace and co-operation among peoples and for the firm establishment of representative democracy. It supports the efforts of and works in close co-operation with the United Nations, whose objectives it shares. The IPU also cooperates with regional inter-parliamentary organizations, as well as with international intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations which are motivated by the same ideals.¹²

⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zx9887h/revision/4>

⁹ https://ailitripp.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/war_revolution_and_the_expansion_of_womens_political_representation.pdf

¹⁰ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)759600](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2024)759600)

¹¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>

¹² <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/inter-parliamentary-work/inter-parliamentary-union/>

International IDEA:

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization that supports democracy worldwide.

International IDEA champions gender equality and women's empowerment as fundamental democratic and human rights and works in all continents to advance inclusive participation and representation of women in political leadership and public decision-making.¹³

UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS):

UN Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, is a landmark resolution that recognizes the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls while emphasizing their vital role in peace and security. It advocates for women's equal participation in peace negotiations, peacekeeping, and post-conflict reconstruction.¹⁴

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA):

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is a visionary agenda for the empowerment of women. It responds to the collective effort of women around the globe who have fought to achieve gender equality and women's rights and acts as a continuum of the international community's commitment to address civil, political, social, economic and cultural inequalities. It is also one of the reference frameworks to analyse the situation of women around the world and to assess the efforts of States in support of women's empowerment.¹⁵

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5.5):

Section SDG 5.5's purpose is to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.¹⁶

¹³ <https://www.idea.int/democracyforall/women>

¹⁴ https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/peace-and-security/global-norms-and-standards#_WPS_resolution.s

¹⁵ <https://archive.unescwa.org/our-work/beijing-declaration-and-platform-action>

¹⁶ <https://globalgoals.org/goals/5-gender-equality/>

Critical Events and Timeline:

1848: First organized movement demanding women's political rights and suffrage (Seneca Falls Convention).

1893: New Zealand was the first self-governing country in the world in which all women had the right to vote in parliamentary elections.

1895: The colony of South Australia allowed women to both vote and stand for election.

1907: Finland was the first country at the forefront of universal voting rights in 1906 and the first parliament to install women in its ranks.

1979: The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was adopted by the United Nations.¹⁷

2015: Adoption of SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) 5.5, aiming to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.¹⁸

2023: IPU Data shows women hold only 27% of parliamentary seats worldwide.¹⁹

Current Situation:

International governments and institutions are increasingly recognizing that women's political representation is essential for stronger democracies and responsible governance. Many states have adopted different approaches based on their understanding of the issue and national context. For instance, a widely used solution has been the introduction of gender quotas, now implemented in over 130 countries²⁰, some nations have used mandatory parliamentary quotas by legally enforcing rules that require a certain minimum number of seats on a party's electoral list to be filled by women²¹ to significantly improve representation, such as Rwanda and Spain. While other states rely on political parties to commit to balanced candidate lists without government legislation. These varied strategies aim to accelerate women's political inclusion and ensure that leadership reflects the diversity of society as well as demonstrating that institutional design can either support or obstruct women's political advancement.

Despite progress, women still face several obstacles. Structural barriers through discriminatory laws and institutions limit women's options to participate in political life, which means women are less likely than men to have the education, contacts, and resources needed to become effective leaders. As a result, while the proportion of women in parliament has increased fractionally by 0.3 percentage points to 27.2% compared to a year ago, in

¹⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>

¹⁸ <https://globalgoals.org/goals/5-gender-equality/>

¹⁹ <https://www.ipu.org/news/press-releases/2025-03/ipu-report-parliamentary-gender-gap-narrowed-over-past-30-years-progress-stalled-in-2024>

²⁰ https://www.ipu.org/news/press-releases/2025-03/ipu-report-parliamentary-gender-gap-narrowed-over-past-30-years-progress-stalled-in-2024?utm_source

²¹ <https://epthinktank.eu/2012/10/04/quotas-in-politics/>

United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

government positions it has declined by 0.4 percentage points²². There is no doubt that the situation has improved over the years. However, the need for more robust and collaborative governmental initiatives remains, in order to fully leverage the role of women's political representation in governments internationally.

Questions to consider:

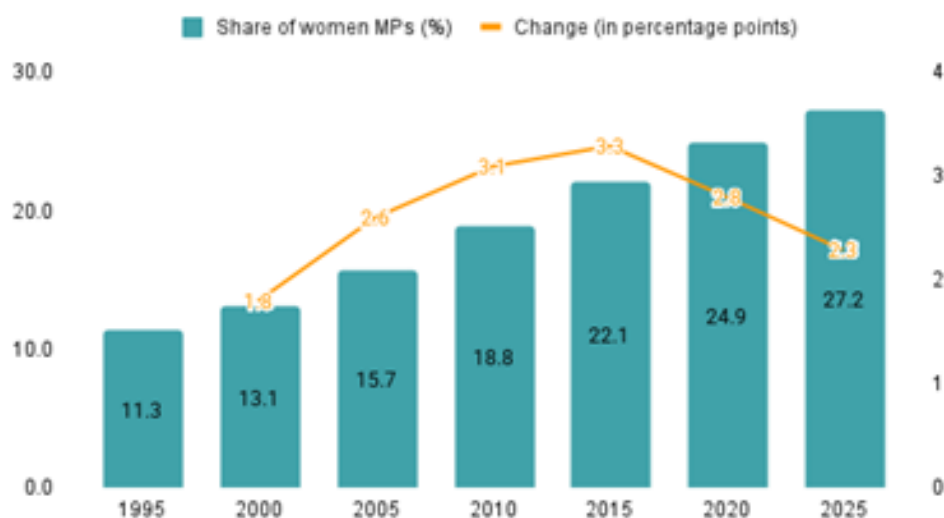
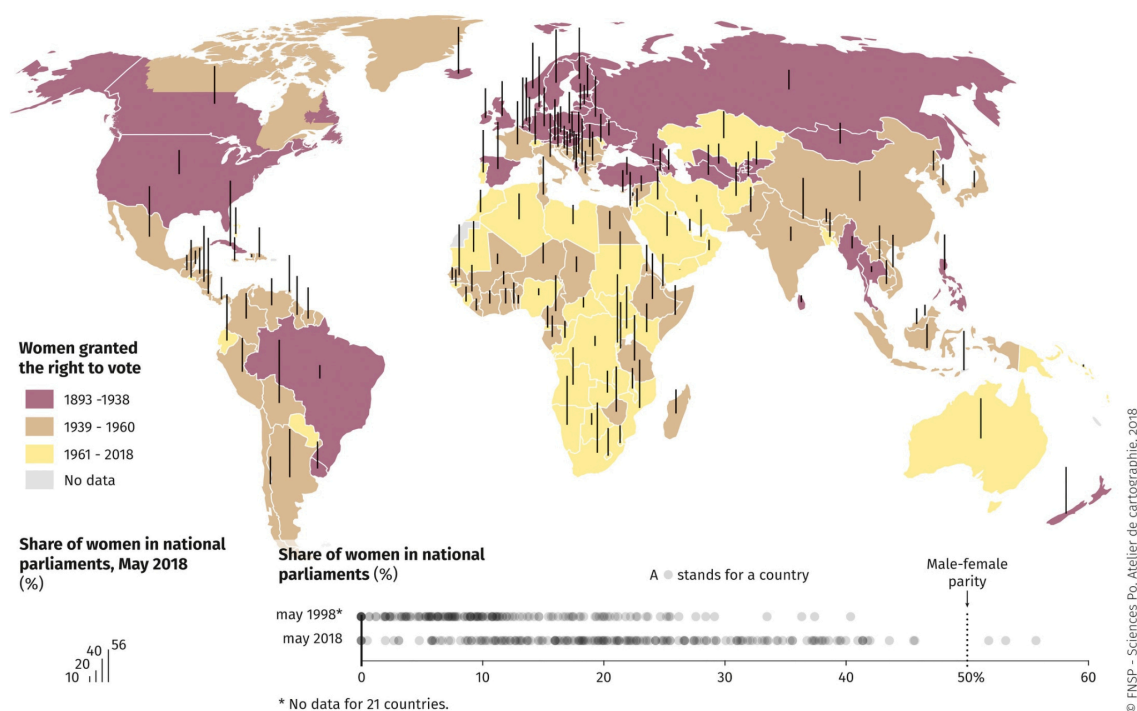
- What is the current level of female representation in your country's parliament, ministerial positions, and local government?
- Does your country currently have any form of gender quota-constitutional, legislated, or party-based? If yes, to what extent has it been effective?
- How does your country address political violence and harassment against women candidates or officeholders?
- How receptive is your country's political process to the concerns of minority women, rural women, and marginalized communities?
- Which national events or political transitions have impacted women's political representation positively or negatively?
- Does your country provide financial, logistical, or training support for women running for office or seeking to participate in political parties?
- How does your country collaborate with regional or international partners to enhance women's political leadership?
- What long-term strategies or reforms does your country propose to ensure sustained progress toward gender-balanced political representation?
- How does your country offer intersectional representation in terms of women of ethnic/religious backgrounds/disabled women?
- In what ways does the government of your country measure the level of women's political representation and compare it to the global criterion of CEDAW/SDG5.5.

²² <https://www.ipu.org/news/press-releases/2025-03/political-leadership-roles-in-2025-men-continue-dominate?utm>

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Helpful Resources & Relevant Media:

Women in national parliaments, World, 1995-2025

[Women in national parliaments, world, 1995-2025](#)

Women granted the right to vote across the globe 1893-2018

Useful Resources

- [IPU report: Parliamentary gender gap narrowed over the past 30 years but progress stalled in 2024](#)
- [Political leadership roles in 2025: Men continue to dominate](#)
- [Labour markets, political leadership and supporting frameworks](#)
- [Gender Quotas Database](#)
- [CORPORATE THEMATIC EVALUATION OF UN WOMEN'S SUPPORT TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION](#)
- [Priced out of power: How economic barriers are limiting women in politics Mar 17, 2025](#)
- [Well-designed gender quotas result in more women elected to parliament - IPU report](#)
- Youtube Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41uIWT2qsWI>

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- The Glass Ceiling in Politics: Formalization and Empirical Tests: <https://www.ifn.se/media/gh2hvxwl/wp1034.pdf>
- Gender Mainstreaming: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/un-system-coordination/gender-mainstreaming>
- Gender bias and women's political performance: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0176268022001173>
- Woman Suffrage and the 19th Amendment: <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/woman-suffrage>
- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>
- What does the IPU do? <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/inter-parliamentary-work/inter-parliamentary-union/>
- Democracy for All - Women: <https://www.idea.int/democracyforall/women>
- Global norms and standards: Peace and security: https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/peace-and-security/global-norms-and-standards#_WPS_resolution,s
- Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action: <https://archive.unescwa.org/our-work/beijing-declaration-and-platform-action>

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- Timeline of women's suffrage: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_women%27s_suffrage
- Political leadership roles in 2025: Men continue to dominate: <https://www.ipu.org/news/press-releases/2025-03/political-leadership-roles-in-2025-men-continue-dominate>
- War, Revolution, and the Expansion of Women's Political Representation: https://ailitripp.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/war_revolution_and_the_expansion_of_womens_political_representation.pdf
- The Role of Political Parties on Women's Participation and Representation: <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/the-role-of-political-parties-on-womens-participation-and-representaion-en.pdf>
- VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS: Global Perspectives of a Global Issue: <https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/violence-against-women-in-politics-global-perspectives-of-a-global-issue.pdf>
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- The status of marginalised groups in political leadership and activism: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13552074.2025.2532956#d1e226>
- Violence against women active in politics in the EU: A serious obstacle to political participation: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)759600](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2024)759600)
- Facts and figures, Women's leadership and political participation: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-womens-leadership-and-political-participation>
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