

Underrepresentation of Women in Politics

Brief Description

Women continue to be significantly underrepresented in politics worldwide, even though they make up about half of the global population. In many countries, women hold far fewer leadership positions than men — including seats in parliament, ministerial roles, and executive offices. This gap affects how fairly governments represent their people and limits the range of perspectives considered when making public policy.

This issue is not caused by a lack of ability or interest among women. Instead, it results from long-standing social expectations, political bias, financial barriers, and institutional systems that make it harder for women to enter or succeed in political life. Because of this, promoting women's political participation remains a key priority for UN Women and global gender-equality efforts.

Historical and Political Background

For much of modern history, women were legally and socially excluded from political life. In many countries, women were denied the right to vote, hold public office, or participate in governance until the twentieth century. The global women's suffrage movement, which gained momentum in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, marked a major turning point by challenging the legal and cultural foundations of political exclusion.

*Following World War II, the creation of the United Nations strengthened international commitments to gender equality. The **UN Charter (1945)** affirmed the principle of equal rights for men and women, laying the groundwork for future legal instruments promoting women's participation in public life. Over the following decades, international treaties and global conferences — including **CEDAW (1979)** and the **Beijing Platform for Action (1995)** — reinforced global obligations to eliminate discrimination and promote women's leadership.*

Despite these advances, political power structures in many countries have remained predominantly male-dominated. Progress toward gender parity has varied widely between regions, influenced by political systems, economic development, legal frameworks, and cultural attitudes toward gender roles. While some nations have achieved significant improvements through quota systems and targeted reforms, others continue to struggle with persistent structural barriers.

Key Facts and Current Situation

*Globally, women hold approximately 25–27% of **parliamentary seats**, though representation differs significantly across regions. Only a limited number of countries have elected women as heads of state or government, and women remain underrepresented in senior ministerial and executive positions.*

Key trends shaping the current landscape include:

- *Countries with **legally enforced gender quotas** generally demonstrate higher levels of female political representation.*
- *Women are more likely than men to experience **political harassment, intimidation, and media bias**, discouraging participation.*
- *Economic inequality limits women's access to **campaign funding and political networks**.*
- *Civil society organizations and youth movements have increased awareness of gender equality, but systemic reform remains incomplete.*

The ongoing underrepresentation of women does not reflect a lack of capability or political interest; rather, it highlights persistent institutional and social barriers within political systems.

Root Causes of Underrepresentation

1. Social and Cultural Barriers

Deep-rooted gender stereotypes often portray leadership as a male domain. In many societies, women are expected to prioritize family and caregiving responsibilities, limiting their time and opportunities for political engagement. Public perception and media representation can reinforce biased views about women's suitability for leadership roles.

2. Political and Institutional Barriers

*Political parties and decision-making institutions frequently remain male-dominated. Women may face exclusion from candidate selection processes, limited mentorship opportunities, and discriminatory practices within party structures. In some contexts, **political violence and harassment** are deliberately used to discourage women from participating in public life.*

3. Economic and Structural Barriers

Running for political office often requires significant financial and logistical resources. Due to wage gaps and unequal access to funding networks, women may encounter greater financial obstacles when launching political campaigns. Limited access to leadership training, education, and policy networks can further restrict advancement.

Impact on Governance and Society

Impact on Political Decision-Making

When women are underrepresented, political decisions may fail to fully address issues such as healthcare, education, gender-based violence, workplace equality, and family policy. Greater female representation has been linked to broader policy priorities and more inclusive legislative outcomes.

Impact on Democratic Legitimacy

A political system that does not reflect its population risks weakened public trust and democratic credibility. Gender-balanced governance strengthens transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement, contributing to more representative democratic institutions.

Impact on Social and Economic Development

Research indicates that increased female political participation is associated with stronger social welfare programs, improved education policies, and more inclusive economic planning. Women's leadership has also been linked to improved community development and anti-corruption initiatives.

International Legal and Policy Framework

Several international instruments support women's political participation:

- **CEDAW (1979)** — Requires states to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life
- **Beijing Platform for Action (1995)** — Calls for equal participation in decision-making
- **UN Sustainable Development Goal 5** — Promotes gender equality and leadership
- **UN Security Council Resolution 2122** — Strengthens women's political empowerment
- **UN Women Leadership and Governance Programs**

These frameworks establish legal and policy foundations for national reforms and international cooperation.

Timeline of Major Developments

- *1893 — New Zealand becomes the first country to grant women the right to vote*
- *1945 — UN Charter affirms equal political rights for men and women*
- *1979 — Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted*
- *1995 — Beijing World Conference on Women emphasizes political empowerment*
- *2015 — Adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5: Gender Equality)*
- *2020s — Renewed global initiatives to increase women's leadership in politics*

Possible Arguments Supporting Reform (Pro-Empowerment Perspective)

- *Increasing women's representation strengthens democratic fairness and legitimacy*
- *Gender-balanced leadership improves policy diversity and social outcomes*
- *Quotas and leadership programs accelerate equality and address systemic bias*
- *Protecting women in politics promotes long-term political stability*
- *Women's participation contributes to more inclusive and responsive governance*

Possible Arguments Raised by Opposing Perspectives. (State or Conservative Concerns)

- *Political selection should be based on merit rather than gender quotas*
- *Cultural traditions and national sovereignty should guide leadership structures*
- *Rapid reform may conflict with social norms in certain societies*
- *Governments should avoid external interference in domestic political systems*
- *Gradual change may be preferred over mandatory reforms*

Challenges and Limitations

- *Resistance to gender quota policies*
- *Cultural norms discouraging female leadership*
- *Political harassment and violence against women*
- *Limited financial and institutional support*
- *Weak enforcement of international commitments*
- *Slow pace of societal attitude change*

Global Comparison Table: Women in Parliament

Country	% of women in parliament	Key Policy
Rwanda	61%	Constitutional quota
Sweden	46%	Party equality rules
UK	35%	Voluntary party quotas
Jordan	~20%	Reserved parliamentary seats
Japan	~10%	No enforced quota

Conclusion

The underrepresentation of women in politics is not just a gender issue — it is a democratic issue. When women are excluded from leadership, political systems fail to reflect the societies they serve, and important perspectives are left unheard.

Closing this gap requires real political commitment, fair laws, safer political environments, and long-term cultural change. Supporting women in leadership strengthens governance, improves decision-making, and builds more inclusive and balanced societies.

Ensuring women have equal access to political power is not optional — it is essential for a fairer, more representative, and more effective global political system.

Relevant Sources

Articles:

1. <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/in-full/>
2. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-womens-leadership-and-political-participation>
3. <https://esthinktank.com/2022/02/28/underrepresentation-of-women-in-politics/>
4. https://feminisminindia.com/2023/02/17/why-are-women-under-represented-in-politics/#google_vignette

Videos:

1. <https://youtu.be/a7K1SPhiriw?si=FqnbpsK8OYxzIta>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Paxf64SWq8Y>