



# The Role of Women in Political Leadership: A Global Perspective

Dr. Hemalatha E

PhD Research Scholar

Dept of Political Science, Osmania University

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## Abstract

The present study attempts to shed light on women's participation in politics through an assessment of the challenges, impact, and issues faced by female politicians in various countries. The study focuses on the achievements of some of the most influential political leaders including Indira Gandhi, Angela Merkel, and Jacinda Ardern. While the achievements of these leaders are commendable and indicate the positive impact women can make in politics, certain limitations continue to act as obstacles that prevent women from taking up political positions. Women's issues in politics include problems related to gender discrimination, gender stereotypes, institutional restrictions, socio-cultural norms, and threats of violence. The present research attempts to identify the course women's involvement in politics is taking and the necessary policy reforms that would lead to increased female participation in politics. It also proposes policy recommendations for enhancing women's participation in politics by recommending gender quotas and political networks for female politicians.

**Keywords:** Women in leadership, gender equality, political participation, female leaders, political barriers

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## I. Introduction

Women have historically been underrepresented in political leadership roles, a phenomenon that is evident across much of the globe. For centuries, societal norms and legal frameworks systematically excluded women from holding positions of power. In many cultures, political authority was seen as a domain exclusively for men, with women's roles confined largely to domestic spheres. The path to political participation for women has been long and arduous, marked by struggles for suffrage, equal rights, and representation. This underrepresentation persisted until the late 19th and early 20th centuries when the suffrage movements gained momentum, advocating for women's right to vote and stand for office. Countries such as New Zealand, the United States, and the United Kingdom were among the first to grant women suffrage, but even with the right to vote, women remained largely absent from the corridors of political power.

The 20th century witnessed significant advances in women's political involvement, with an increasing number of countries electing women to parliament and other leadership positions. The feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s further challenged the patriarchal structures that had limited women's political participation. Over time, many countries began implementing gender quotas and affirmative action policies to address the imbalance in political representation. These initiatives, along with broader social and educational reforms, have gradually allowed women to access leadership positions previously closed to them. Despite these advancements, the number of women in top political roles remains disproportionately low, and the challenges they face continue to evolve. However, the growing participation of women in political leadership is a testament to the changing tides in global gender dynamics and the ongoing quest for gender equality in governance.

## B. Significance of the Study

The analysis of the role of women in political leadership plays a critical role in determining the role of gender in global governance. With the continued increase in the number of women in high political office, their leadership styles, policy priorities and the challenges confronting them provide invaluable information on the overall dynamics of power, decision-making and governance. The gender inclusivity of policies to sustainable development, social justice, and international relations is supported as women are increasingly taking up political leadership roles and breaking down gender norms. This study sheds light on the overall effect of gender diversity on both national and global politics, especially how women leaders contribute to economic, health, and education policies, and peace and security agendas by concentrating on leadership women.

The paper is also aimed at making a contribution to the gender and leadership by looking at the obstacles that the women encounter in becoming political leaders. Although there have been strides in the process of gender equality in politics, a lot still lies ahead, such as the structures bias, gender stereotypes, and unequal access to resources and political networks. By establishing these barriers, the study will contribute to the policy recommendations to enhance gender gaps in leadership. Moreover, knowledge about the leadership styles of women, which tend to be more participative, inclusive, and empathetic, could provide alternative ways of governing the organization, which can result in fair and superior decision-making.

With this study, we will be able to bridge gaps in the existing literature on the role of women in political leadership, and we will focus on the role of the women leaders across the regions and political systems. Not only will this add depth to scholarly debate, but it will also offer much to policy makers, activists, and groups that strive to create more inclusive political spaces across the globe.

### **C. Research Objectives**

- ❖ To explore the impact of women in political leadership across different regions.
- ❖ To identify challenges faced by women in political leadership roles.
- ❖ To analyze the correlation between female leadership and national/international policies.

## **II. The Historical Context of Women in Political Leadership**

### **A. Barriers to Women's Political Participation in the Early era.**

The socio-cultural and legal aspects have always been the deterrents to women involvement in politics. Patriarchal values were so rooted in many societies that the role of women became domestic and they were not included in the life of the community and in decision making. These restrictions were supported by laws and traditions, whereby voting rights, access to education and the right to stand in office were limited. In ancient Greece, women did not participate in political affairs at all, and in most Western countries, they did not have the vote until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that women were seen as being emotionally or intellectually inferior also contributed to legal restrictions combined with societal beliefs that women are simply unfit to hold leadership positions. The political participation of women started gaining traction during the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the suffrage movements in such countries as New Zealand (1893) and the United States (1920) as an attempt to make women no longer bound by the legal and social restrictions on their rights. Yet, these early wins were not universal and decades later, women in many areas were not disenfranchised or allowed to hold formal political positions. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the legal reforms gradually broke the blocks to the political participation of women, however despite all these changes, the socio-cultural prejudice was so firmly rooted that it was not simple to achieve political leadership by the majority of women.

### **B. Women in Politics.**

Women who became the first to take a high political leadership position had a myriad of challenges, including gender discrimination and even aggression. India had one of the most iconic female politicians, Indira Gandhi who became the first woman Prime Minister of the country in 1966. Her leadership transformed the politics of India, but was not without criticism and opposition because of her gender. Likewise, Margaret Thatcher, the first female Prime Minister of England and Wales was a pioneer when she assumed office in 1979 and became the first woman to preside over a nation that had never had a woman Prime Minister. Her strong economic policies defined the leadership of Thatcher, yet she was under scrutiny as well, her decisions being often seen through the prism of gender. Other innovative leaders include Ellen Johnson Sirleaf who became the first female president of Liberia in 2006. Her leadership guided the country in the process of post-conflict recovery, and her work gained her recognition world-wide, yet she maneuvered in a politically disarming situation as a woman in a patriarchal society. These leaders among others opened the way to political leadership of women and they overcame obstacles and demonstrated that women were not only capable of being involved in politics but of being their own leaders.

### **C. Development of Gender Roles in Politics.**

The development of gender roles in politics has been a progressive but a revolution. With shifting social attitudes, feminist movements, and legal reforms, the involvement of women in the political leadership has increased markedly in the last century. The political role of women has increased beyond the activities of participating in the electoral processes to holding the strong offices such as heads of state and government, members of legislature and ministers. Women such as Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher, showed in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that women are capable of holding executive power and making national policies. In the long run, nations came up with gender quotas, thus, greatly enhancing the number of women in the legislative houses. As an example, the political arena in Rwanda witnessed an incredible transformation as women occupied over fifty percent of parliamentary seats, which was emulated elsewhere in the world. The development of gender roles

has also culminated in the change of styles of leadership and women tend to focus on social justice, peacebuilding and gender equality in their political agenda. Although the emergence of women in political leadership has not been an unchallenged event due to the presence of gender prejudices, political violence, and unequal access to resources, the change has taken place. The role of women in leadership has transformed the methods of global governance, as it has introduced a variety of opinions in the table, impacted global organizations, and advocated policies to fight gender inequality. This transformation has been felt in world governance with the realization of the need to have gender-sensitive approaches in policy making and the importance of inclusive leadership in enhancing social and economic development.

### **III. Women in Political Leadership: A Global Overview**

The involvement of women in political leadership has been on the rise, albeit in low numbers at the top governmental positions in the world. The number of women as heads of state or government in 25 countries is relatively small as of the latest statistics, and in comparison to the prevalence of male heads of state in the rest of the world. Although the number of women in political offices is gradually increasing, the number of women in executive offices, including Presidents and Prime Ministers, is even lower. This underscores the fact that women continue struggling to acquire the highest political offices in spite of making huge strides in other political arenas.

Among the notable aspects of global politics is the disparity in the representation of women in democracies and autocracies. Gender quotas and affirmative action policies have been put in place in democracies to make women more involved in politics. Nevertheless, in autocratic regimes or more controlled political systems where civil society is restricted and power systems are frequently controlled by a small elite, access to political leadership by women is still restricted. Such systems are characterized by vastly fewer women taking up important political positions and when they do, they find overwhelming obstacles on the way to their political agency and influence.

On the parliamentary level, the world has witnessed a high number of women parliamentarians and currently most countries have approximately 27.5 percent of women parliamentarians. This is a significant change to the past decades when women were radically underrepresented in decision making organs. The emergence of parliamentarians of both genders has resulted in gender-responsive policies, especially in healthcare, education, social welfare, and gender equality. Nevertheless, even with these dividends, women still have a low representation in the legislative organs in contrast to their male counterparts. Another aspect that has demonstrated the advantage of gender diversity to political processes is that women in legislative positions have been more determined to change policies to focus on social justice, equality, and gender-related concerns.

The proportion of women in political leadership differs widely regionally. North America and some parts of Europe have witnessed great development with states such as Canada, the United States and most of the Scandinavian countries providing a massive woman representation in politics. Nordic nations, especially, have been seen as a beacon of encouragement of gender equality in political representation, in fact a number of countries have become almost gender equal in their national legislature. By comparison, Latin America has achieved remarkable progress, especially in countries such as Argentina, Bolivia and Costa Rica where gender quotas and political reform have made great strides in making women more involved in politics.

Countries like Rwanda are the only countries in Africa that have managed to rank among the highest number of women in parliament in the whole world with over 60% of the seats occupied by women. This has been developed through the good will of the political leadership and the enactment of the gender quotas that have seen women assume power in offices. Nevertheless, there are still difficulties in most parts of the African continent as most countries are yet to offer equal opportunities to women in the political arena.

Contrastingly, Middle East and certain aspects of Asia are still below the global average in respect to the representation of women in politics. Women have been largely denied a chance to engage in politics due to cultural and societal norms as well as political structures, which are mostly patriarchal. Although there are some bright examples of female leaders in such countries as Pakistan, India, and the Philippines, there is still much to be done with the situation in the region. Women political participation in these areas is usually restricted to certain functions in their societies, and women are highly vulnerable to political violence, discrimination, and harassments in case they want to assume leadership positions that are more important.

Regardless of such regional differences, women all over the world have persisted to shatter the glass ceiling and clear path to the future generations of female political leaders. Nonetheless, the rate of change has been very slow and most women continue to face systemic and institutional obstacles like gender discrimination, access to political networks, and societal expectations on their roles in the society. Moreover, women politicians are usually targeted by political violence, harassment and media discrimination which hamper their actions and discourage new entrants into the political scene.

The following table provides a snapshot of female representation in political leadership around the world:

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>Source</b>
Women as Heads of State/Government	25 countries	UN Women data (2025) ( <a href="http://unwomen.org">unwomen.org</a> )
Women in National Parliaments	<b>27.5%</b>	IPU (2026) ( <a href="http://ipu.org">ipu.org</a> )
Change since 1995 (parliament seats)	From 11% to 27.2%	UN Women (2025) ( <a href="http://unwomen.org">unwomen.org</a> )

These numbers indicate that although there has been a tremendous improvement in the number of women elected and elected to the position of political leadership, especially in the national legislatures, the high government still has problems. The worldwide representation of women leaders shows that there is a wide gap, with certain areas performing remarkably whereas others are lagging behind because of strongly established cultural, social, and political obstacles. The way ahead must be further advocacy of gender equality, political reforms favouring the inclusion of women and an integrated strategy to break down the structural hurdles women encounter in the political life.

Female leaders in the political arena still struggle, although more women are taking part, the political arena is changing its course and presenting more chances of inclusive politics. The rise in female representation all over the globe is an indicator that change can be achieved though a concerted effort is required so as to make sure that all the global levels of political leadership are equally represented by women.

#### **IV. The Challenges Faced by Women in Political Leadership**

Women in political leadership face various challenges, which are complex and rooted within gender biases, socio-cultural expectations, institutionalized factors and violent types of harassment. Such obstacles reduce the chances of women to rise to leadership, maintain political offices and to wield power in governance.

One of the most widespread issues that female politicians can meet is gender discrimination and stereotypes. In many societies, male leadership is given priority and women are seen to be unfit to hold power in politics because they are said to be emotional unstable, they lack experience or they are incapable of making decisions in high pressure conditions. Such prejudices are manifested in the media and political discussion, when female politicians are often evaluated more strictly than their male counterparts. Women have been socialized to believe in traditional femininity which may not be in line with assertiveness or authority characteristics that are normally attributed to leadership. To illustrate, when women leaders are seen to be strong, or decisive, they can be branded as being too aggressive, or unlikeable, whereas men with the same kind of traits are credited with leadership skills. Such stereotypes do not only make it difficult to see women in leadership positions, but also cause them to be under a constant watch to their leadership. This social discrimination may also make women never want to venture into politics at all since they might believe that they will be looked at more negatively or be looked down on due to their gender.

There are also institutional barriers that make political leadership by women more complex. Political parties are the most vital in political processes across the world and most of them are structured in a way that puts male candidates at an advantage and women are not given a chance to hold leadership positions. Most political structures are highly patriarchal and power is in the hands of a small group of men who dictate decision making and access to political resources. Under these circumstances, women tend to find it difficult to win the backing they need to ascend in political institutions and the political party system itself may be inhospitable to new ideas. Women are also less likely to be appointed to high profile leadership roles or even be afforded equal resources to campaign and influence politics as compared to their male counterparts. This inequality spreads to political parties into the legislative bodies and governments, where decision-making mechanisms are usually filled with male views, and women are unlikely to disrupt the status quo. Moreover, women are frequently underrepresented in inner circles of power, including political backrooms or other informal decision making rooms, where much of the actual political action is carried out.

Another important reason that institutionalizes the barriers to women in politics is media representation. When it comes to women politicians, the media tends to treat women politicians with bias that concentrates on the looks, family life or the intimate relationship they have with others instead of their policies or political skills. This kind of media coverage is used to support the old forms of gender expectations and devalues the grave political activity that women are involved in. Media tend to not regard female politicians as equal to the men in the political arena, and concentrates more on their sex or personal lives instead of their accomplishments in the work area. This not only discredits women in politics but also scares other women out of politics since they might view political leadership as an arena where they would be evaluated not by their abilities and policies but by looks and character.

Socio-cultural norms and household duties are another significant factor hindering women in political leadership. In most societies, women have to balance the family duties before personal or career goals. Such social standards frequently position women as care givers, who have to handle the chores at home and be in

charge of the children making it hard to fit the demanding time and travel schedules of political leaders. The stress to deliver the expected roles in the home front has often compelled the women to choose between the need to pursue a career in politics and their own roles in the family. This is further aggravated by the fact that there is no supportive infrastructure like affordable childcare, flexible working hours, and parental leave policies, which would enable women to balance their political careers and family life more effectively. Conversely, men will hardly be expected to bear the same responsibilities thus it may be easier to take up and maintain political careers. Also, the absence of representation in decision-making organs, particularly at the family and community levels, implies that the voices of women are not usually represented in decision making processes regarding policies, which may assist in the mitigation of these issues.

The need to subscribe to the conventional gender roles usually translates into women having minimal community or even family support when they decide to take up political leadership. In most situations, the political aspirations of women are discouraged or looked down upon because they have to concentrate on family and household chores. Such support deficiency may make it a lot more difficult to women to be successful in politics, especially in those cultures where women expectations are strictly followed, and are not negotiable. As a result, women have a higher mountain to climb to gain the resources, time and support needed to contest office and become viable political leaders.

Political violence and harassment are special types of violence that are disproportionately experienced by women in politics. Such types of violence are frequently gendered and may involve physical, emotional, and psychological injuries. Sexual harassment, threats and intimidation are some of the gender based violence that are commonly employed to discourage women involvement in politics or to weaken their leadership. Online abuse, especially cyberbullying (a type of harassment) is a common feature of women politicians and more specifically high-profile women, making it a rampant and a hard-to-address harassment. This harassment is often accompanied by sexist and misogynistic remarks to undermine women and doubt their leadership. Women politicians have often become targets of violence threats, the idea behind them being to either intimidate them out of their career or to stop them expressing their opinions in the political arena. The looming violence and harassment may also act as a strong deterrent to women who may be thinking of joining politics as most of them worry about their lives and the lives of their families.

In other nations the political violence against women may be in more extreme forms such as kidnapping, rape, and even killing. When political violence is perpetrated by the government or conflict zones, women in politics are especially susceptible because of their resistance to the status quo. This violence not only affects individual women negatively but also chills the larger participation in the political arena since it sends a message that any participation of women in the political arena will be met with violence or retaliation. In more mature democratic situations, the harassment and threats that female politicians have to deal with on a regular basis can reduce their effectiveness as leaders and deter other women to take a leadership position.

Gender discrimination, institutional factors, socio-cultural norms, and political violence come to an intersection that offers a formidable challenge to women in political leadership. Similar to the current situation in most parts of the world, these issues remain impediments to women taking part in the entire political process. These challenges would only be overcome through a multidimensional strategy that would deal with gender biases, institutional reform, support women to balance family and career, and safeguard women against violence and harassment in the political arena. It is only through these issues that women will be able to enjoy equal representation and impact in politics as their counterparts.

## **V. Case Studies of Prominent Women Political Leaders**

The first female Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, had two non-consecutive terms, between the years 1966 and 1977 and 1980 and 1984 and left an unforgettable mark in Indian politics and International relations. Accidental to her controversial policies and decisive leadership, the tenure of Gandhi witnessed some of the greatest moments, including the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971 that resulted in the establishment of Bangladesh, and made Gandhi a strong and decisive leader. Her economic policies were characterized by her attempts to centralize the economy, nationalize key industries and have land reforms in order to alleviate inequality. Nevertheless, her move to declare a state of emergency in 1975, in which civil liberties were suspended and political dissent curtailed, is a contested part of her history. At the global front, Gandhi played a major role in the Non-Aligned Movement in the Cold War, as he tried to ensure that India remained independent of the influence of the super powers. Her leadership was transforming the political face of India and cementing the power of the Congress Party and it made India assertive in the global arena.

Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor in 2005-2021 is generally considered one of the strongest leaders in the European history. Merkel was a pragmatic, steady, and European integrationist in her tenure. During her time of leadership, Germany emerged as one of the powerful European Union countries, particularly during the Eurozone crisis, as she was instrumental in formulating the response of the EU towards the financial crisis faced by Greece. The leadership approach adopted by Merkel focused on consensus-making and

diplomacy and this won her a lot of admiration in the international scene. Her approach to the 2015 migrant crisis, which sparked controversy, showed her dedication to humanitarian principles, and it also brought about domestic and European arguments on immigration policy. Not only did Merkel stabilize the economy of Germany but she also established Germany as an important participant in EU and world politics. Her legacy is that of a conservative, careful leader who overcame several crises and led Germany through the intricate geopolitical problems.

Jacinda Ardern was the Prime Minister of New Zealand since 2017 until 2023 and gained recognition due to her compassionate approach, especially during crises. Her response to the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings, during which 51 people were killed by a white supremacist, was received with many accolades of compassion and timely reaction. The other aspect of leadership that gained the international recognition during the COVID-19 pandemic is the control of the spread of the virus by Ardern who imposed strict border controls and lockdowns. The leadership approach of Ardern was based on progressive policies on social matters, including child poverty, climate change, and gender equality, coupled with a prioritization on collaboration and empathy. Her focus on compassion and inclusiveness transformed the political rhetoric of New Zealand, providing an example of the emotional intelligence and humanistic leadership approach. Nonetheless, overcoming these obstacles, such as political resistance and the media attention, the legacy of Ardern as a crisis leader and progressive change agent is immense especially when it comes to her capacity to communicate with individuals during hardships.

## VI. Conclusion

The studies of women in political leadership have brought to the fore a number of important insights. Women have gone a long way in political leadership positions, breaking frontiers both on the national and international front. The example of female leaders like Indira Gandhi, Angela Merkel, and Jacinda Ardern is a good illustration of the influence of women in top-level political positions, as they were able to influence the national policies, international relations, and provided effective leadership in the period of crisis. Despite these achievements, women still have to cope with daunting obstacles, such as gender discrimination, societal stereotypes, institutional barriers, and political violence that do not allow them to be fully involved and even promoted in politics. Media coverage biases based on gender, political parties patriarchal system, and social-cultural norms also limit access of women to leadership roles, and thus further advocacy and reforms are needed.

In the future, the future of females in political leadership is expected to be bright, but a lot is yet to be achieved. With the increasing number of women taking part in politics and becoming leaders, they are slowly transforming political systems across the world. The fact that the number of women representatives in the parliament is increasing and that the world has acknowledged female political leaders is an indication of the shifting trends in governance. But the rate of change differs based on the region as certain countries are making tremendous development and others are not keeping up because of cultural and political issues. With gender responsive policies and social change, a more inclusive and representative politics may be achieved through the further increase of women leaders.

To increase the participation of women in politics, the policy recommendations would be to use gender quotas, access to political networks equally, and support women in politics and family life. The laws need to be reinforced to prevent political violence and harassment of women and political parties need to put gender equality at the forefront in their leadership. The necessity of the societal and political reforms cannot possibly be overestimated; to make gender equality in political leadership sustainable, awareness, and advocacy are needed to make sure that women have the opportunity to make a full contribution to the shaping of the future of the global governance.

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