

Women and politics: Realities and myths

Should one expect the involvement of women parliamentarians to lead to different policy outcomes? The reasons one can assume women might act from a different perspective than their male counterparts are practical rather than theoretical.

An alternative perspective

In an extensive survey of 187 women parliamentarians from 65 countries conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in 1999, the respondents consistently portrayed women as having different priorities from men. Four out of every five respondents believed that women held conceptually different ideas about society and politics. More than 90 per cent agreed that women's greater participation would bring about change, and almost 9 out of every 10 considered that women's participation in the political process significantly changed political outcomes.

Three reasons women politicians are likely to approach politics differently

Women's motivation for entering politics is often different from that of men. In the IPU survey, 40 per cent of the respondents stated that they had entered politics as a result of their interests in social work and 34 per cent through non-governmental organizations, as opposed to the more 'conventional' path of party politics often embraced by men. This finding accurately reflects a well-established tendency among women to engage in civil society as a way of promoting projects that support household survival, and to focus their energies at the local level.

Women are often exposed to different patterns of socialization and

have different life experiences than men and are likely to bring their experience and expertise to bear on their political decisions. While important changes have been taking place over the past few decades, in most countries, women still bear the main caregiving responsibilities for their families, including children and the elderly.

Women are more likely to see themselves as representatives of women. A study of legislators in the United States, for example, found that women feel a special responsibility to represent other women and consider themselves more capable of representing their interests. In Northern Ireland, for example, almost one third of women who vote thought a woman would better represent their interests.

Why are there still so few women in politics?

Given their potential contribution to the political process, an obvious question arises: Why then are there still so few women participating in politics? The answer is multifaceted and differs across countries, societies and communities. But several common threads are outlined below.

Women are unlikely to run for political office. While exact numbers are difficult to come by, existing studies indicate that women are less likely than men to run for office. In the United States, for example, men are at least 50 per cent more likely to have investigated how to place their name on the ballot, or to have discussed running with potential donors, party or community leaders, family members or friends.

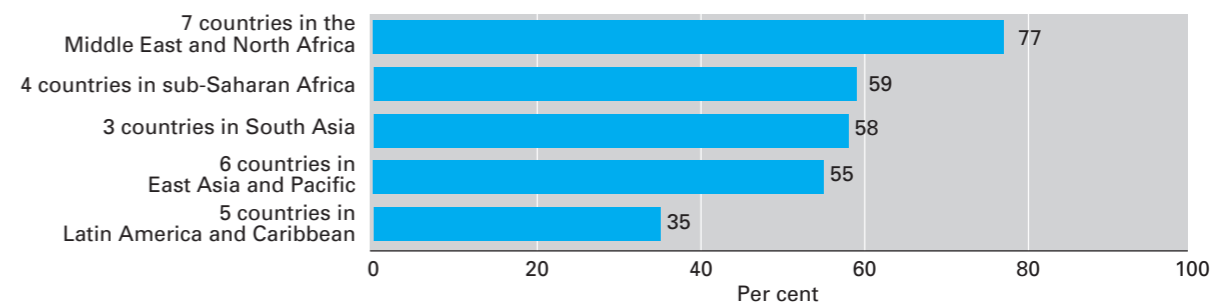
- **Double burden of public and private responsibilities:** As the preceding chapters have shown, women's work burdens are generally much heavier than men's, leaving less time and energy for involvement in political life. In the United States, evidence shows that as women's responsibilities for household tasks and caregiving decrease, their interest in running for office increases.

- **A culture of exclusion:** In many countries, both political and financial networks are controlled by men. Cultural practices that serve to nurture and consolidate bonds of male solidarity within these networks, such as drinking, smoking or golfing, are key stepping stones on the path to political office. A study in Thailand found that men typically dominate recruitment committees and tend to bypass women candidates, both in order to retain a structure they are familiar with and because they are more likely to know the male candidates personally.

- **Higher participation in education:** Those women who run for office successfully, especially in developing countries, tend to be educated to tertiary level at least. Out of the 187 women from 65 countries surveyed by the IPU in 1999, 73 per cent held an undergraduate degree and 14 per cent also held graduate degrees. The lack of women educated to tertiary levels in many countries can therefore act as a barrier to their participation in politics and government.

Women face an uphill struggle to win over public opinion. There are very few statistics about how many women run but fail to get elected.

Figure 4.2 In most of the countries surveyed, a majority of the public agrees or strongly agrees that men make better political leaders than women



UNICEF calculations are based on data derived from the World Values Survey, Round 4 (1991-2004). Data for each country and territory in the regional aggregates are for the latest year available in the period specified. The following countries and territories are included in the regional aggregates cited: **Middle East and North Africa:** Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia. **Latin America and Caribbean:** Argentina, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Chile, Mexico, Peru. **South Asia:** Bangladesh, India, Pakistan. **East Asia and Pacific:** China, Indonesia, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Viet Nam. **Sub-Saharan Africa:** Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania. Notes on the methodology employed can be found in the References section, page 88. **Source:** World Values Survey, <www.worldvaluessurvey.org>, accessed June 2006.

Voter perceptions, however, can offer an instructive indication. On average, more than half the people surveyed in East Asia and the Pacific, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa agreed or strongly agreed that men make better political leaders than women, with three quarters sharing that view in the Middle East and North Africa. However, in other parts of the world, the evidence is more positive. Far fewer respondents share this view in Latin America and the Caribbean, and over 80 per cent in Thailand think that a woman could be a good prime minister.

Women leave politics. There is little data available on whether women leave office more than men due to voter hostility or outright violence sometimes directed against women who are in office (or try to run for office). Women *pradhans* (leaders) in West Bengal, India, for example, revealed that even though women delivered an amount of public goods to their villages that was equal to or higher than that of their male counterparts, villagers were not only less satisfied with their leadership but

also blamed them for the inadequate quality of services outside of their jurisdiction. Perhaps unsurprisingly, about half of the *pradhans* said they would not run again. In Afghanistan, women candidates in the 2005 election were subject to violence and, in some instances, death threats.

Myths about women in politics

Myths about women in politics, both positive and negative, abound. Because such myths rely on unrealistic assumptions about women and politics, they can easily perpetuate stereotypes and discrimination. Two such myths are discussed below.

Myth 1: Every woman will make a difference for women and for children. Just because a legislator is a woman does not mean she will automatically promote legislation that advances the interests of women and children. Women in politics are individuals who can fall anywhere on a wide spectrum of personality and ideology. Women legislators are accountable to constituencies that represent a wide variety of backgrounds and interests, and may

often find themselves divided by ideological, regional, class or other differences. Furthermore, they are members of political parties and sometimes have to follow party discipline at the expense of their own policy preferences. Nonetheless, evidence strongly suggests that, on the whole, women parliamentarians are more likely than their male counterparts to use their political leverage to effect change in support of children, women and families.

Myth 2: Women are unsuited to the 'hard' jobs. A 2005 IPU tally of ministerial portfolios held by women counted 858 women ministers in 183 countries. The distribution of portfolios, however, is striking. While almost a third of all ministerial jobs held by women fell in the area of family, children, youth and social affairs or women's affairs and education, women accounted for only 13 ministers of defence and 9 ministers of the economy worldwide (or 1.5 per cent and 1 per cent, respectively).

See References, page 88.