Women's Participation in Politics

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Introduction

Women's political participation is a vital component for sustainable peace. Yet, 25 years after the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, which set the international target for reaching gender balance in political decision-making, women are underrepresented across all levels of power.[1] As of 1 January 2021, there was a slight increase in the global share of women in national parliaments from 24.9% to 25.5% and increases in the number of women at the highest levels of political power.[2] However, there was also an increase in the number of countries with no women in government. The Global Women Peace and Security (WPS) Index (2019) does however record some improvements in women's global status measured through autonomy and empowerment at home, in the community, and in society. Since the launch of the WPS Index in 2017, women's status has improved by more than 5% in 59 countries and by more than 10% in eight countries.[3] Many of the countries at the bottom of the WPS Index ranking are afflicted by extensive organized violence and, not unsurprisingly, organized violence has widespread repercussions for multiple aspects of women's well-being. Furthermore, peace is more fragile when women, and their perspectives and preferences, are excluded from the

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[1] UN Women, "Women in Politics," 2020.

[2] International Parliamentary Union (IPU) website: www.ipu.org/news/women-in-politics-2021. Global data on women in parliaments can be found on the International Parliamentary Union (IPU) website: data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=1&year=2021.

[3] Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), *Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20: Tracking sustainable peace through inclusion, justice, and security for women*, 2019: 31.

political process and from political decision-making.[4] Research suggests that the end of long-standing armed conflict has a positive impact on women's political representation. However, this can only be said for cases after 2000, when the international community started prioritizing women's political inclusion.[5]

The period following a negotiated peace settlement faces a high risk of conflict. This period is fraught with internal conflicts based on grievances, under-development and mistrust, which all increase the risk of violence.[6] Raising women's representation and participation in politics can help increase the durability of peace through two mechanisms. The first is by prioritizing social welfare spending over military spending, and the second is by positively influencing public perceptions of governance quality and elite credibility.[7] While the research fields acknowledge that this does not mean that women are innately peaceful, as women are capable of both perpetrating violence and promoting peace,[8] it does illustrate the importance of governance that is representative of the population's needs and perspectives.

Women's Political Representation: Conflicting Objectives

Elections in established democracies differ in their objectives from those held as part of peacebuilding efforts in post-conflict states. In post-conflict states where there is broad consensus in support of women's free and active electoral participation, the international community will not be faced with conflicting objectives between supporting women's political participation and the broader peace process through elections. However, in post-conflict states in which there exists strong opposition against women's participation in politics, especially when local political actors are opposed to this and appeal to cultural and religious norms, the cost to the broader peace process increases significantly.[9] At this point, international bodies will have to make decisions specifically regarding the case at hand.[10] While compromise on an issue as vital as women's participation in politics is undesirable, a return to conflict might have a worse impact on the population and on state stability. However, the decision to prioritize stability above women's rights sets a dangerous precedent moving forward. Additionally, it is during this post-conflict period in which the international community has the most impact on decision-making within the state. Therefore, to abandon women's participation in politics can undermine broader human rights within the state and the durability and legitimacy of peace. There is no single right answer to this complex issue; international bodies will have to negotiate

[4] Shair-Rosenfield and Wood, "Governing Well after War," 2017.

[5] Hughes and Tripp, "Civil War and Trajectories of Change in Women's Political Representation in Africa, 1985–2010," 2015.

[6] Collier et al., "Breaking the Conflict Trap : Civil War and Development Policy Research Report," 2003.

[7] Shair-Rosenfield and Wood, "Governing Well after War," 2017.

[8] Sjoberg and Gentry, *Mothers, Monsters, Whores*, 2007.

[9] Maley, "Enhancing Women's Participation in Electoral Processes in Post Conflict Countries," 2004.

[10] The United Nations' Focal Point for Electoral Assistance has a policy directive providing a checklist of issues that may impact country-specific policies for women's participation in politics. United Nations, "Promoting women's electoral and political participation through UN electoral assistance," 2013: 8–11.

based on the specifics of the case and the amount of leverage they have in the peace process.

Obstacles to Women's Political Participation

Women face unique obstacles in entering political office and these vary depending on the region, culture and political history.[11] The following is an inexhaustive list of some of the obstacles discussed in the literature:

- Poverty and low level of education of women due to limited access to economic and educational opportunities.[12]
- Gender stereotypes reinforced by patriarchal systems that view women's role as belonging in the home rather than in political life.[13]
- Violence against women in politics.[14]
- Lack of political financing.[15]
- Media prejudice against women's participation in politics.[16]
- Gendered aspects of the digital divide such as unsafe online spaces. These hinder women's access to and use of digital platforms. This is problematic, as political participation increasingly takes place on digital platforms.[17]

Mechanisms for Strengthening Women's Participation[18]

International Standards:

- Ensure that documents setting out international standards for the freedom and fairness of elections properly reflect the critical importance of universality and the rights of women as dictated by Articles 2 and 21 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Articles 2(1) and 25 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,* and Article 7 of the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.*[19]
- Encourage international bodies to take a tougher line on election deficiencies in general, and those which compromise the legitimate participation of women in particular.

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[11] For an overview of the status of women's participation around the world, see the Global Women Peace and Security Index 2019.

[12] Indar, "Obstacles to Women's Political Participation in Indonesia," 2002.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Kumari et al., "Violence Against Women in Politics: A Study Conducted in India, Nepal and Pakistan," 2014.

[15] Media platforms such as "I know politics" discuss barriers and provide knowledge and access to actors engaged in improving women's equitable participation in politics. See: www.iknowpolitics.org/en

[16] Haraldsson and Wängnerud, "The Effect of Media Sexism on Women's Political Ambition," 2019.

[17] Bardall, "Gender-Specific Election Violence: The Role of Information and Communication Technologies," 2013; Hiblinger, "Digital Inclusion in Peacemaking: Summary of Findings," 2020; Brown, "The use of ICTs in conflict and peacebuilding: A feminist perspective," 2018.

[18] Maley, "Enhancing Women's Participation in Electoral Processes in Post Conflict Countries," 2004.

[19] "Universal Declaration of Human Rights"; "OHCHR | International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights"; "OHCHR | Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women," 2015.

- Encourage the adoption of gender quotas for the selection of female candidates to political office.[20]
- Develop benchmarks for levels of participation by women in different levels of election processes, which will serve as the minimum requirement for an election to be deemed "free and fair".
- Ensure that benchmarks and minimum requirements are included in guidance documents for election observers.

Policy Development:
- Clearly state guarantees of the rights of women in peace agreements. This is essential, as this is the time the international community's bargaining power is at its strongest Establish policy consultation that ensures women are represented and that their voices are heard. Women must be part of the process and be given decision-making power.
- Review proposed legal frameworks for elections to identify elements of the proposed mechanism which may in practice hamper women's participation. In particular, critically review the need for residency requirements in any electoral law. The latter impacts women's participation in post-conflict cases where women are often internally displaced persons and may as a result become disenfranchised.[21]

Example of Gender Quota Adoption in Afghanistan

Gender quotas were adopted in the Afghan legislature following the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan. While there is some debate on the intention behind this decision, it is clear that women's grassroot movements, who had been the backbone of their communities' survival, were prepared to take this opportunity. The women's rights activists saw the occupying forces' discourse focused on women as an important way to hold them accountable to their promises of women's empowerment. As such, Afghanistan's reconstruction period provided a unique opportunity for women's groups to gain political representation.[22] Afghanistan currently operates under a bicameral parliament with legislated quotas for the single/lower house and at the sub-national level. Out of the 248 seats in the Wolesi Jirga, House of the People, 67 are held by women.

Further Country Examples:

For further information on the implementation of women's participation in politics in different cases, please see the following:

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[20] Krook makes a point that international norm diffusion is key to supporting domestic mobilization, highlighting the role that international organizations can play in strengthening demands by local groups. Krook, "Reforming Representation: The Diffusion of Candidate Gender Quotas Worldwide," 2006.
[21] United Nations, "Women and elections," 2020.
[22] Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, "International IDEA"; Tajali, "Gender Quota Adoption in Postconflict Contexts," 2020.

- Argentina and Chile.[23]
- Afghanistan and Iraq.[24]
- Rwanda and Afghanistan.[25]
- Colombia.[26]
- Mexico.[27]
- Zambia.[28]
- Somalia.[29]

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[23] Gray, "Electoral Gender Quotas," 2003.

[24] Krook, O'Brien, and Swip, "Military Invasion and Women's Political Representation," 2010.

[25] Tajali, "Gender Quota Adoption in Postconflict Contexts," 2013.

[26] This article is interesting in that it presents the internal Colombian debates on gender quotas. Jaramillo Ruiz, "Colombia's Constitutional Debate on Gender Quotas: The Link between Representation, Merit, and Democracy," 2019.

[27] Kerevel, "Empowering Women?" 2019.

[28] Wang and Muriaas, "Candidate Selection and Informal Soft Quotas for Women," 2019.

[29] Nyabola, "A Seat at the Table: The Fight For Gender Parity In Kenya And Somalia," 2016 and Horst "Implementing the Women, Peace and Security agenda? Somali debates on women's public roles and political participation", 2017.

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