

Breaking Barriers and Building Power: The Ongoing Struggle and Triumph of Women in Politics

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DESCRIPTION

Throughout history, women have played pivotal roles in shaping societies, yet their presence in political leadership has often been marginalized. Today, while women have made notable strides in politics, their journey is far from over. From grassroots activism to the highest offices of power, women continue to challenge entrenched norms, demand equity, and redefine leadership. The increased visibility of women in politics marks a transformative shift, yet their representation remains far below equitable levels. Understanding this journey involves exploring both the challenges women face and the progress they have achieved.

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Women's political participation is a relatively recent development in global history. For centuries, legal systems and social conventions excluded women from voting, running for office, or even attending political gatherings. The suffragette movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were critical in pushing for women's rights, leading to voting rights in countries like New Zealand (1893), the United States (1920), and later across Europe, Asia, and Africa. However, gaining the vote was just the beginning. True political empowerment involves the ability to influence decisions, shape policy, and lead at every level of governance. This continues to be a work in progress.

The current landscape

As of 2025, women hold around 26% of parliamentary seats globally. While some countries—such as Rwanda, Finland, and Sweden—have achieved or surpassed gender parity in political representation, many others lag significantly behind. In some regions, particularly in parts of the Middle East and South Asia, cultural, religious, and institutional barriers still severely limit women's political involvement. Even in nations with advanced democratic systems, women often face systemic obstacles: lack of funding, insufficient media support, gender-based discrimination,

and hostile political environments. Female politicians are more likely to be targets of online harassment and threats, further discouraging participation.

Why women in politics matter

When women are at the decision-making table, they bring unique experiences and priorities that contribute to more comprehensive, inclusive policymaking. Studies consistently show that women in politics are more likely to advocate for education, healthcare, child welfare, and social justice. Their leadership styles often emphasize collaboration, transparency, and ethical governance. Moreover, women's representation is essential for democracy itself. A representative government should reflect the diversity of its population—not only in gender but also in race, socioeconomic status, and lived experience. Without women, half the population is underrepresented, leaving important perspectives and solutions unheard.

Barriers to participation

Several key challenges continue to hinder women's full participation in politics.

In many societies, politics is still viewed as a male-dominated space. Deep-rooted beliefs about gender roles discourage women from entering public life or taking on leadership roles. Women often lack the same networks, mentorship opportunities, and party support that men enjoy. Political parties may be reluctant to nominate female candidates, especially in constituencies considered “unsafe” or less winnable. Running a political campaign requires significant financial resources. Economic inequality means many women cannot afford the high costs associated with candidacy. The media often scrutinizes women politicians differently—focusing on appearance, family roles, or personal life more than on policy and leadership. Social media has also become a platform for targeted gender-based harassment.

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Strategies for progress

Despite these barriers, progress is being made through a combination of policy changes, social movements, and public awareness. Here are some proven strategies to support women in politics:

- **Gender Quotas:** Legislative quotas have been instrumental in increasing women's representation. Countries like Rwanda and Argentina have implemented quotas that require a minimum percentage of women in parliament or on party lists.
- **Leadership Training and Education:** Programs that teach leadership skills, public speaking, and campaign management empower women to run for office and succeed. Many international organizations and NGOs offer resources specifically for aspiring female politicians.
- **Mentorship and Networks:** Access to strong support systems—both formal and informal—is critical. Mentorship from experienced women in politics can guide new entrants and build confidence.
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Changing societal attitudes is key. Campaigns that highlight successful women leaders and promote gender equality can help shift public perception and reduce stigma.

Global examples of women leading change

Several women around the world have made history through their political leadership:

- Jacinda Ardern, former Prime Minister of New Zealand, was celebrated for her empathy-driven leadership during crises like the Christchurch mosque attacks and COVID-19 pandemic.
- Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia became Africa's first elected female head of state in 2005, steering her country through post-civil war reconstruction.
- Finland's former Prime Minister, led a coalition government composed mostly of women under 40, demonstrating the growing influence of young female leaders.

Their success stories serve as powerful inspiration for women everywhere, proving that political leadership is not bound by gender.

CONCLUSION

Empowering women in politics is not just about fairness—it's about building stronger, more responsive governments. Women's voices must be heard at every level of decision-making, from local councils to national leadership. By breaking down barriers and fostering a culture of inclusion, we move closer to a world where leadership reflects the richness and diversity of its people.