

# Global Impact of Women Elected Officials on Public Policy

Stephenie Foster, JD

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**The political empowerment of women** is one of the defining characteristics of the 20th century. Women fought for and gained the right to vote in most countries in the 20th century and increasingly ran for, and were elected to, office. In addition to holding approximately 20% of all parliamentary seats worldwide, women serve as presidents and prime ministers. Women have used their power to raise issues in the policy arena, and research has shown that women in elected office make a difference. This paper explores the progress that has been made in this regard.

To place this in context, norms around women's political leadership have been established in part by international treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which

addresses political participation of women, among other issues.<sup>1</sup> The UN world conferences on women, culminating with the Fourth World Conference held in Beijing reaffirmed norms of women's equal access to - and full participation in - power structures and decision-making. Efforts intensified after Beijing, with other international efforts, including UN Security Council resolutions and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In particular, MDG Three recognizes the fundamental role of women in development, and measures progress in part by the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments.

### Who Are the Women in Policy Making Positions?: Women Heads of State

Since 1950, there have been approximately 70 women heads of state, not including monarchs or those appointed by monarchs to serve as ceremonial heads of government. The number of women heads of state has remained relatively low, hovering around 10-15 women heads of state at any one time. There have been women heads of state in almost every region of the world, and they span the ideological spectrum.

These women have taken one of two basic paths to power: (1) serving as a representative of a deceased (often assassinated) male family member<sup>2</sup> and (2) climbing the ladder of the country's political and party systems.<sup>3</sup> In many cases, the

1 The US has not ratified CEDAW; other countries not ratifying are: Iran, Somalia, Sudan, and three small South Pacific island nations (Nauru, Palau, and Tonga).

2 See S. Foster, *Women Heads of State, Encyclopedia of Women in Today's World*, eds., Mary Zeiss Stange and Carol K. Oyster (New York: Sage Publications, 2011). About a third of women heads of state have come to power following (although not immediately) a husband or father who was assassinated while in office or while running for office. These women are seen as representatives of their family's political legacy, and campaign as such. Virtually every woman head of state in Asia, and a significant number in Latin America, have followed this path. Examples include: Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who followed her father Jawaharlal Nehru into power; Philippine President Corazon Aquino, who was elected president after her husband was assassinated; Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who took over the political mantle from her father Prime Minister Zulfikar Bhutto; Nicaraguan President Violeta Chamorro, who campaigned as a proxy for her assassinated husband, Pedro Chamorro; and the two women Bangladeshi Prime Ministers, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wajed.

3 These include Prime Minister Golda Meir of Israel; Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom; President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia; Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany; President Michelle Bachelet of Chile; Prime Ministers Helen Clark and Jenny Shipley of New Zealand; and Prime Minister Julia Gillard of Australia.

women in the latter category also come from families with political involvement. This latter path is increasingly being taken by women heads of state.

### Who Are the Women in Policy Making Positions?: Women Legislators

Women currently hold about 19% of parliamentary seats worldwide, up from 13.1% in 2000. As of December 2010, Nordic countries have the most women in Parliament at 41.6%, while Arab states are the lowest at 11.7%. In 43 countries, women have reached the UN target of 30% representation, a slight drop from 2009.<sup>4</sup> In the Middle East, four women made history in May 2009, becoming the first women elected to parliament in Kuwait. This paper does not address barriers women face to elected office, but they are significant and summarized in the footnote below.<sup>5</sup>

### Impact of Women in Elected Office

Research demonstrates that women in elected office make a difference in terms of (1) public policy, (2) democratic governance and constituent services; and (3) leadership.

### Policy Impact

A legislator's gender has an impact on his or her policy priorities. As more women serve in office, there is an increased focus on issues traditionally seen as women's issues (education, health care) but also in issues that affect women's daily lives, such as water and infrastructure.

For example, an important study of legislative actions in countries belonging to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found that women legislators are more likely to sponsor legislation on issues such as child care, education, and health care.

4 Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU), *Women in Parliament in 2010: The Year in Perspective*.

5 The barriers can be cultural, based on the structure of the electoral process, or both. Barriers include hostile and/or belittling environments, which can make their efforts exceptionally difficult, including electoral violence; cultural norms about the role of women; hostile media coverage; and cultural taboos around women raising money. The structure of a country's electoral system can affect the numbers of women elected. Women do better in systems where seats are assigned in proportion to the number of votes received by the parties ("proportional representation" systems). In PR systems, 20.7% of legislative seats are held by women, as opposed to 13.3% in non-PR systems. While somewhat controversial, quotas for women are the most effective way to increase women's representation, and are used in almost 100 countries. Some quotas are set forth in national constitutions or laws; others are set forth in party rules. Some are based on set asides for seats; others are based on placements on party lists. According to UNIFEM, women comprise 21.9% of legislators in countries with quotas, in contrast to 15.3% in countries without them. [http://www.unifem.org/gender\\_issues/democratic\\_governance/](http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/democratic_governance/)

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tion and Development (OECD) found that the greater the number of women in a country's parliament, the more that country spends on education as percentage of GDP and per capita. The study looked at 19 OECD countries between 1960 and 2005.<sup>6</sup>

Research at the local level suggests that local women legislators have a positive impact on the delivery of services to women and children. Here are three case studies, from very different parts of the globe:

- In Norway, researchers found a direct causal relationship between the proportion of city council seats held by women and legislation regarding the level of childcare services provided by Norwegian municipalities.<sup>7</sup>

- In 1993, India amended its constitution to increase the number of women serving in local panchayats to 33% and to ensure that 33% of all these councils are headed by women. (Panchayats are responsible for decisions made by local governments.) Researchers found that women were most likely to complain to the local council regarding water resources, and that they made the same level of requests and complaints to both male and female led councils. However, there was a striking difference in the response. The number of drinking water projects funded was more than 60% higher in women led councils than male led councils.<sup>8</sup>

- In the US, women state legislators in virtually every state have been found to be more likely than their male colleagues to take liberal positions on a wide array of issues, such as gun control, social welfare, civil rights, environmental protection, and public health and safety, and they are more likely than men to support to abortion rights and the Equal

Rights Amendment.<sup>9</sup> These women are also more likely to serve on committees dealing with social policies, such as education, welfare, and health, and less likely to serve on powerful or prestigious committees, such as appropriations or finance. More often than men, women take the lead on women's issues, no matter how broadly or narrowly defined. They are more likely to express concern in debates about such issues and take an active interest in them, often considering themselves to be experts.<sup>10</sup>

## Does Critical Mass Matter?

There is research that supports the "critical mass" theory, that as more women serve, they will have a greater influence on policy. A study of bill introduction and passage in the Arizona state legislature found that as the percentage of women increased, so did women legislators' legislative activity on behalf of women's traditional interests.

The influence of a critical mass may be mitigated by a backlash effect, with male legislators threatened by the influx of women. Another possibility is that once a critical mass is reached, and women become institutional players assigned to committees covering a range of issues, they will no longer feel as strong of a need to represent women and women's issues. Arguably, once the numbers of women increase and they are on a broad

9 Research summarized in Anne Marie Cammisa and Reingold, Beth "Women in State Legislatures and State Legislative Research, State Politics & Policy Quarterly, Vol. 4, No.2 (2004).

10 Id. At the US federal level, however, women work on a wider range of issues. Three of the last four US Secretaries of State have been women, and there are now three women (of nine) on the US Supreme Court. In Congress, where women only hold 17% of the seats, women are now represented on 40 of 41 committees, and either chair or are ranking members on nine (of 20) Senate Committees and five (of 21) House committees. In the US Senate: Agriculture, Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), chair; Commerce, Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX), ranking member; Energy, Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), ranking member; Environment, Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-CA), chair; Homeland Security, Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME), ranking member; Small Business, Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-LA), chair; Veterans Affairs, Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA), chair; Ethics, Sen. Barbara Boxer, chair; Select Intelligence, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), chair.

In the US House: Leader, Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA); Ethics, Rep. Linda Sanchez (D-CA), ranking member; Foreign Affairs, Rep. Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), chair; Rules, Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-NY), ranking member (Rules is arguably the most powerful US House committee as its sets rules for debate on the floor); Science/Space/Technology, Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX), ranking member; Small Business, Rep. Nydia Velazquez (D-NY), ranking member.

range of committees (as we see in the US Congress), they are actually more influential.

Women's caucuses also have a positive impact. One study found bills addressing traditional women's issues were most likely to pass in the five states (out of 12 studied) with formal women's caucuses.<sup>11</sup>

## Democratic governance and constituent service

Several studies show that increased numbers of women in office results in "better" governance practices, including greater responsiveness to citizen needs, increased cooperation across party and ethnic lines and more sustainable conflict resolution. In the US, research shows that women legislators are more likely to engage in constituent service than their male colleagues. In a survey of state legislators in four states, women legislators believed they "put more emphasis on constituency service than the typical legislator in my state." These women legislators reported receiving significantly more requests for constituency casework than did their similarly situated male colleagues.<sup>12</sup>

An additional impact of increasing numbers of women in public life is a decrease in corruption. There has been tremendous attention paid to work done by the World Bank, which has found that in countries where there are more women in public life (both as political actors and business leaders), there is less corruption. An influential study of 150 countries in Europe, Africa and Asia came to the conclusion that women are more trustworthy and less prone to corruption, a finding later corroborated by additional research from the World Bank.<sup>13</sup>

This research and the underlying concept that women possess greater integrity has been challenged, however, because it fails to account for the ways in which our social norms and structures limit women's opportunities to engage in corruption, particularly when corruption functions through all-male networks and forums.<sup>14</sup>

## Women and leadership

Research shows that women's leadership

11 Research summarized in Anne Marie Cammisa and Reingold, Beth "Women in State Legislatures and State Legislative Research, State Politics & Policy Quarterly, Vol. 4, No.2 (2004).

12 Id.

13 David Dollar, "Are Women Really the Fairer Sex? Corruption and Women in Government," World Bank Working Paper Series No. 4 (1999); Swamy et al, "Gender and Corruption," IRIS Centre Working Paper No. 232 (1999).

14 Anne-Marie Goetz, Political Cleaners: How Women are the New Anti-Corruption Force. Does the Evidence Wash? (2004).

6 The study found that for every 1% increase in the number of women legislators, educational expenditures increased by 0.028 percentage points, a statistically significant amount. The research also found that having a more liberal or left-wing government per se did not impact educational expenditures and that the positive effect of women legislators does not depend on the country's parliamentary system. Chen, Li Ju, "Female Policymakers and Educational Expenditures: Cross Country Evidence," *Research Papers in Economics* (2008).

7 This study looked at a 20 year time span, and controlled for a variety of factors, including party ideology, the number of single parent families in the municipality, and the percentage of women of childbearing age. K. Bratton & Ray, L., "Descriptive Representation, Policy Outcomes & Municipal Day Care Coverage in Norway," *American Journal of Political Science* 46 (2) (2002).

8 R. Chattopadhyay & E. Duflo, "Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India," *Econometrica* 72 (5) (2004).

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and conflict resolution styles are more inclusive. A study of 285 US state legislative committee chairs, focus groups and individual interviews found that women committee chairs resolved conflict differently than male colleagues, working in a less hierarchical, more participatory and more collaborative manner.<sup>15</sup> Similar data is found globally where women parliamentarians and legislators said they brought a level of civility to politics and policy making that their male colleagues did not, and that by their presence they made a difference in this regard.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> C.S. Rosenthal, "Gender Styles in Legislative Committees," *Women & Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2001).

<sup>16</sup> IPU, "Politics: Women's Insight (2000), available at [http://www.ipu.org/PDF/publications/womeninsight\\_en.pdf](http://www.ipu.org/PDF/publications/womeninsight_en.pdf)

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