European Democracy Hub

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Beyond Beijing: Rethinking Women's Political Participation

Elene Panchulidze (ed.)
Mona Lena Krook, Aarti Narsee, Minna Cowper-Coles, and Saskia Brechenmacher

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The European Democracy Hub is a joint initiative of Carnegie Europe and the European Partnership for Democracy. It acts as a focal point for work on democracy, bringing together analysts and policymakers engaged with EU democracy support and democratic challenges in Europe.

European Democracy Hub
Rue Froissart 123-133
B-1040 Brussels
info@europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu
https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/

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Foreword

Thirty years ago, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action set a bold vision for gender equality and women's political participation globally. To date, through multilateral cooperation, we have made significant steps towards fulfilling this vision, yet progress remains fragile and uneven. Structural barriers, deeply entrenched societal norms, and gender-based violence hinder equal representation in politics and decision-making. At the same time, new global challenges – including rising authoritarianism, digital threats, and growing disinformation – threaten to unravel the progress achieved.

Over the last decades, Club de Madrid and its members have been at the forefront of efforts to support gender equality and women's political participation globally. Our community honours the potential of female leadership and places gender equality at the centre of its work. Our vision of a democracy that delivers cannot be achieved unless all people, men and women alike, have equal rights and opportunities. Our members, both individually and collectively, remain committed to this cause.

Many Members of Club de Madrid attended the Beijing Conference in 1995 and led reform agendas and changes in their countries to drive progress and enhance both women's roles in politics and their influence in decision-making. Gender equality is one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but it is also a cross-cutting objective of many national political agendas and crucial to fostering peaceful and inclusive societies, ensuring justice for all, and establishing effective, inclusive, and accountable institutions at all levels.

Yet, geopolitical powershifts, violent global conflicts, and the prioritisation of security have significantly altered the political priorities across many countries and multilateral organisations. Support for democracy is under strain globally, and this is complicating the implementation of existing gender programmes around the world.

Against this backdrop, Club de Madrid decided to contribute to this report both as a reminder of the power of multilateral cooperation for progress and as a warning of what is at stake. The report builds on Club de Madrid's past engagement and support for women's political participation in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, and Latin America, as well as our collective appeal for gender equality in politics worldwide.

The next chapter of democracy cannot be written without women having equal rights and standing in leadership. Club de Madrid will need to sharpen its focus on fostering multilateral cooperation and governance to deliver results, especially at a time when women's rights organisations across the world will require crucial support.

Laura Chinchilla, President of Costa Rica (2010–2014)
President of Club de Madrid

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Introduction

— Elene Panchulidze

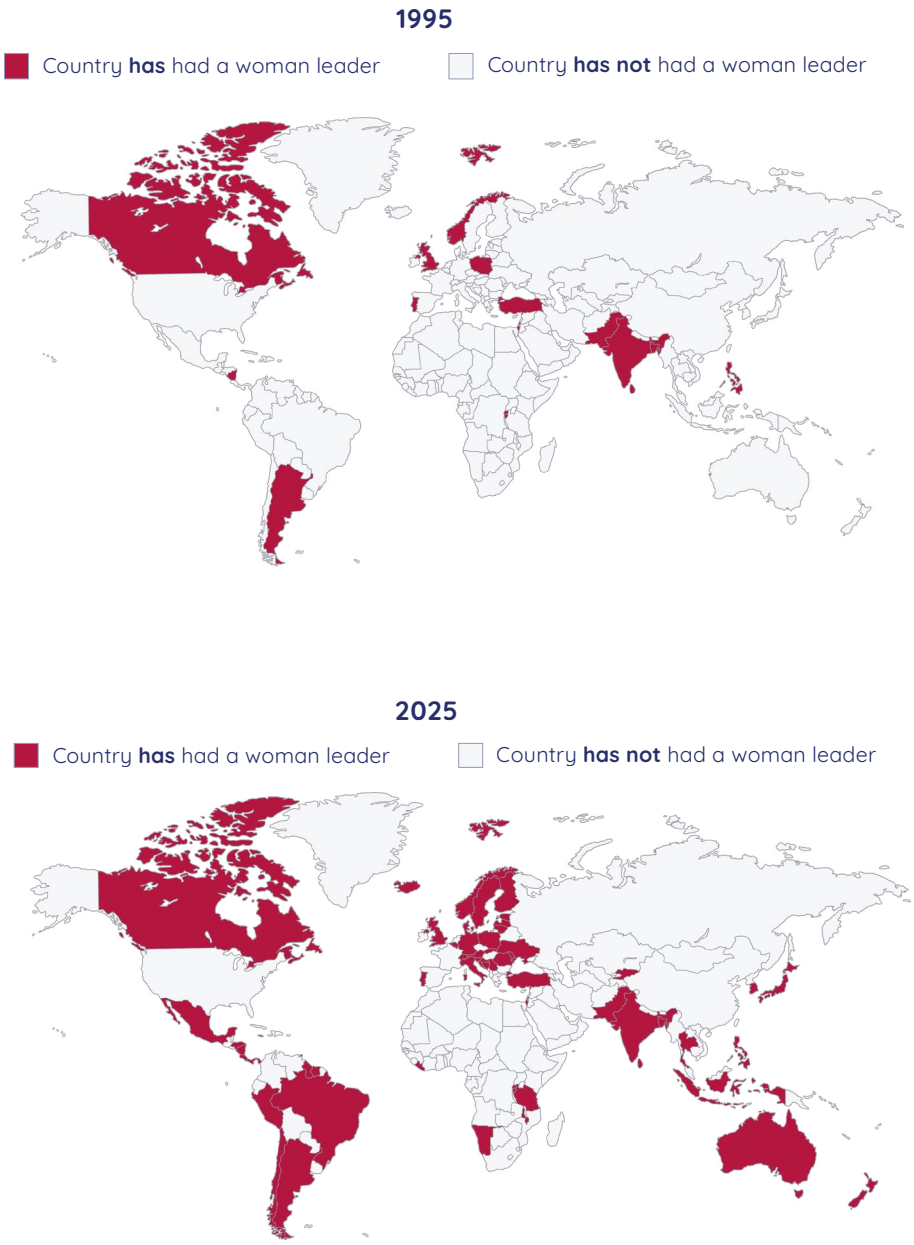
"Human rights are women's rights - and women's rights are human rights". Hillary Clinton, then first lady of the United States (US), made this bold statement at the 1995 Beijing conference, the world's largest conference on women, which brought together more than 6,000 delegates from 189 countries.[1] It was a symbolic and powerful moment, as women were reshaping democratic politics through leadership and political participation. The Beijing Conference produced the 1995 Declaration and Platform for Action that identified 12 key aims designed to eliminate discrimination against women and improve women's political participation.[2]

The Beijing Conference was hailed as a major achievement for the women's rights movement, with an extraordinary number of countries ratifying the Declaration and Platform for Action. Yet thirty years later, a Beijing+30 review reported that advances in women's political participation and leadership remain uneven and vulnerable to reversal. Despite strong normative commitments, the goal of equal representation in politics has not been achieved.[3]

While the number of female leaders has steadily increased since Beijing, 113 countries have never had a female head of state or government, and in 2025 only 25 countries were led by a woman[4] (Figure 1.) The relatively low number of women in politics and senior decision-making positions is particularly noticeable at global summits like the G20, where only a few women represent their country. However, former female leaders acknowledge that "breaking the silence has been their most significant accomplishment, as women speaking up has made it impossible for the world to ignore the issue or fail to take the necessary action for gender equality".[5]

As part of a wider global trend of stronger gender commitments in international politics, over a dozen countries have officially committed to pursuing a feminist foreign policy (FFP). Initiated by Sweden in 2014, countries in the global north and south have stepped up their efforts to support gender equality internationally.[6] This has resulted not only in stronger political commitment but also in greater institutional support and increased financial resources allocated to gender-transformative action in foreign policy. Some actors that have not officially adopted an FFP, such as the European Union (EU) have nonetheless pledged to allocate more than 80% of their external spending to gender initiatives.[7] Yet these commitments have proven increasingly fragile in practice, with at least half of those countries that officially committed to a feminist approach to foreign policy later renouncing their pursuit.[8]

Figure 1. Countries having had a female head of state or government in 1995 and in 2025



Source: "About a third of UN member states have ever had a woman leader", Sofia Hernandez Ramones, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/03/02/about-a-third-of-un-member-countries-have-ever-had-a-woman-leader/

Note: These maps are illustrative; boundaries and designations used do not represent or imply any opinion on the part of the authors or the European Democracy Hub.

The political momentum that emerged around the Beijing Conference, when countries were eager to make ambitious commitments to gender equality, has largely reversed since. Three decades later, the international political community has lost much of its drive in advancing democracy and gender equality worldwide.[9] In 2025, the Trump administration announced major funding cuts to the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which significantly reduced overall assistance and left many women's organisations around the world without vital support.[10]

In addition, growing security concerns linked to rising global conflicts have led to the increased securitisation of foreign policy by European governments. The prioritisation of security has resulted in detrimental cuts to the development cooperation budgets of major donors, including the Netherlands (€1 billion for 2026–2030), the UK (40%), France (37%), Belgium (25%), and Sweden.[11] Funding for gender equality has been among the primary targets of these reductions, even among longstanding supporters.

For instance, funding for projects with gender equality as a principal or secondary objective within Sweden's official development assistance (ODA) has steadily declined since 2019, from 84% to just 67% in 2023.[12] The UK's support for gender equality dropped by nearly half between 2019 and 2022, and the British government is also reportedly considering scrapping its commitment to allocate 80% of foreign aid to projects that promote gender equality.[13]

Losing gains?

Over the past three decades, governments, international organisations, and democracy support donors have made significant commitments to advancing women's empowerment. Yet even multilateral bodies mandated to promote gender equality, and to establish frameworks that incentivise governments and ensure accountability, often fall short of their commitments.[14] In 80 years of operation, the United Nations has never had a female secretary-general, and only five of the 80 presidents of the General Assembly have been women.[15] This persistent absence of women in leadership positions at the highest levels undermines public trust in multilateral organisations.[16]

The goal of women's political empowerment is more challenging today compared to in the early 1990s, when the number of countries democratising was much higher and the momentum to foster gender equality was increasingly prominent.[17]

For the last two decades, democracy reports suggest that autocratisation has become the dominant trend and over two-thirds of the world's population live in autocracies.[18] At the same time, illiberal leaders have challenged gender norms and women's rights across the world, from Hungary to Afghanistan's exclusionary autocratic regime. While authoritarian leaders have

> *"The absence of women in leadership positions in international organisations questions the commitment to gender equality of multilateral organisations and erodes public trust.*
>
> *- Susana Malcorra*

eroded women's rights in many countries, this wave of repression has also reignited women's collective action. Iran's striking political uprising – "Woman, Life, Freedom" – demonstrates that the women's rights movement is still prominent and serves as a powerful counterweight to global autocratisation.[19]

The conservative backlash driven by illiberal and populist leaders has further challenged gender norms globally. Manifesting itself in various forms, it seeks to reinforce traditional gender roles deeply embedded in societies, often under the guise of defending "family values" or preserving national identity. Countries such as Argentina and the US have witnessed setbacks in gender equality as political leaders roll back progress across multiple areas, particularly threatening women's political rights and participation in decision-making. Yet, despite these challenges, women continue to mobilise in large numbers in defence of democracy and equal rights.[20]

Women's movements have had a positive impact in many countries, winning concessions from governments and contributing to meaningful political change, as seen in Poland. Yet progress has been uneven. Greater political participation by women has not automatically translated into genuine power or agency in decision-making. In fact, since 2023, the number of female leaders worldwide has declined from 30 to 25,[21] as those in Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Slovakia, and Scotland have left office for a range of political and personal reasons.[22]

The decline in women's political leadership can be partly attributed to the unique threats female politicians face, online and offline. Online gender-based violence has surged alongside growing digitalisation and advances in artificial intelligence. In response, numerous non-governmental initiatives, such as #ShePersisted, have emerged to address gendered information attacks against women in politics by researching digital harms and supporting women leaders in strengthening their digital resilience.[23] Governments and tech companies must also take responsibility and support legislative measures that challenge perpetrators and protect female politicians from direct attacks and disinformation narratives.

Alongside these challenges to gender equality and women's political participation, the international community's commitment to supporting gender rights and broader democratic reforms appears increasingly uncertain. In particular, the suspension of activities by USAID and other major democracy support donors is likely to have a significant long-term impact on democracy and development assistance worldwide. In many countries, women's rights organisations and feminist movements will be among the hardest-hit by declining political and financial support.[24] These geopolitical shifts and evolving priorities of the democracy support community call for enhanced coordination among donors to bridge gaps and sustain the progress achieved over the past three decades.

While philanthropic actors have stepped in to provide flexible and timely support, their resources cannot substitute for the scale, predictability, and political leverage of government-led assistance. Without renewed public commitment, the ecosystem that has sustained women's political participation since Beijing risks erosion at the very moment it is most needed.

Taking stock

In response to these inauspicious trends, Club de Madrid and the European Democracy Hub undertook a project to take stock of 30 years of women's political participation and leadership, assessing the progress made while also identifying persistent barriers that hinder women from increasing their role in senior decision-making. While a number of indices – such as the United Nations Development Programme's Gender Inequality Index, the Council on Foreign Relations' Women's Power Index, and the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index – track women's political empowerment, our project contributes to the debate by emphasising qualitative assessments of women's political participation and drawing out policy lessons and recommendations to improve interventions.

The report examines developments since the Beijing Conference and reflects on the challenges and barriers hindering women's political participation, offering policy recommendations and identifying actions needed in the next phase of women's political empowerment. It provides insights into formal legislative measures supporting women's political participation and informal innovations promoting this around the world. The report draws in part on 12 interviews with Members of Club de Madrid, former heads of state and government from Argentina, Canada, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Finland, New Zealand, Senegal, Slovenia, and Sweden. Several of our interviewees led their countries' delegations to the Beijing Conference and/or advanced gender equality reform agendas in their respective countries.

Our research does not merely provide a quantitative outlook on political offices occupied by women since the Beijing Conference. Instead, we assess the progress made in women's political participation by examining meaningful shifts towards gender equality in the political sphere. Our report also identifies effective policy interventions by governments and the democracy support community, offering policy recommendations and informing advocacy efforts to further advance women's political participation.

This report brings together leading scholars on gender equality and women's political empowerment, as well as practitioner experts with experience supporting women's organisations and feminist movements globally. In addition, it incorporates the political and policy insights of Club de Madrid Members – former heads of state and government whose testimonies enrich the analysis with first-hand experience of governing, negotiating reforms, and advancing gender equality at the highest levels. The four thematic chapters explore various aspects of women's political participation worldwide.

Mona Lena Krook explores and contrasts different approaches undertaken by governments to increase women's political participation and draws lessons on enabling factors such as quota systems, leadership training programmes, and grassroots initiatives.

Aarti Narsee analyses global innovations in political participation and explores innovative approaches that support women's political engagement, such as digital platforms and coalition-building strategies.

Minna Cowper-Coles outlines key challenges and persistent barriers that continue to constrain women's political participation, despite formal political interventions, highlighting overlooked areas in democracy support.

Saskia Brechenmacher examines democracy support trends and the global aid ecosystem for improving women's political participation and identifies areas for further intervention.

This report's findings are mixed but overall reinforce the grounds for concern about the future direction of support for women's political participation. The report provides a snapshot of where the women's political participation agenda stands today and offers advice to the democracy support community on how to improve its actions in this area. The authors stress the political momentum that the Beijing Conference provided but also lament its atrophy in recent years. Progress on women's political participation has been significant in some areas but remains unduly limited to rather formal measures that have not succeeded in changing underlying norms in its favour. The international community has made some strides in prioritising gender programmes, but it needs to do a lot more to mainstream women's political participation in its democracy support. With a gender backlash gaining momentum in many countries around the world, new thinking is needed beyond commitments such as the one the Beijing Conference provided 30 years ago.

Elene Panchulidze is the head of research at the European Partnership for Democracy and the European Democracy Hub initiative.

The Equality Agenda:

Six Bold Actions to Ensure Women's Political Leadership

This report recognises that the goal of achieving gender equality in politics remains far from realised. Drawing on the evidence compiled and the political experience of Members of Club de Madrid, a set of policy recommendations has been formulated to support efforts to advance women's political participation. The recommendations outline a shared agenda that calls on governments, civil society, and international partners to work together in promoting progressive gender norms and strengthening inclusive democratic participation.

I. **Safeguarding gender equality in official development assistance.** At a time of democratic backsliding and sustained pressure on development budgets, treating gender equality as a core priority of official development assistance (ODA) is a political choice with direct democratic consequences. Cuts to gender-related ODA are not neutral financial adjustments: they disproportionately weaken women's political participation and erode the institutional and civic foundations that sustain democratic resilience. Governments and donors should therefore protect and sustain funding for gender equality, prioritising predictable and, where possible, multi-year support to consolidate the gains achieved since the Beijing Conference and reduce their exposure to reversal in an increasingly adverse political context.

II. **Expanding the gender equality ecosystem.** In response to the growing global backlash against gender equality and the severe funding cuts to gender-related initiatives, the democracy support community must urgently reassess how it sustains women's political participation and recognise that democracy cannot exist without women's full and equal participation. As governments adjust their priorities and shift their focus towards security concerns, expanding the gender equality support ecosystem is essential. Broadening this circle of support, including non-traditional actors – philanthropic organisations, local institutions, and the private sector – will help sustain the lifeline support for women's movements worldwide that advocate for systemic progress and gender-equal democratic politics, and it will help ensure that women's movements are not left isolated when political conditions become less favourable.

III. **Strengthening laws conducive to strengthen women's political participation.** Achieving gender equality in political representation requires constitutional and legislative reforms and binding standard across all levels of government that establish gender parity as an aspiration. International experience shows that parity and quota laws are only effective when they ensure that women occupy winnable positions on party lists, preventing practices that fulfil the letter of the law while undermining its purpose. To avoid that such laws remain aspirational only and guarantee compliance, these laws must be accompanied by credible disincentive measures. These measures should be applied when relevant actors fail to comply. In the case of political parties, for example, these can be in the form of rejection of candidate lists or significantly reduced access to public

funding. These laws will close loopholes that allow political parties to circumvent requirements and will transform insufficient voluntary measures into a legally binding framework that makes gender parity non-negotiable in democratic participation.

IV. Advancing comprehensive legislation to prevent violence against women in politics. The equality agenda cannot move forward without legal frameworks that criminalise all forms of violence against women in politics, from physical attacks to online gender-based harassment, disinformation, and psychological abuse. As political participation increasingly takes place in digital spaces, protections that apply offline must also be upheld online. Effective responses require coordinated action by governments and civic actors, including engagement with technology companies to develop and enforce approaches that prevent, mitigate, and respond to gendered abuse and online violence. Governments should recognise that these measures are not about the protection and safety of individual politicians but about systemically responding to threats that prevent democratic participation.

V. Supporting intersectional inclusive representation. Efforts to advance women's political participation cannot be effective if they treat women as a homogeneous group. The evidence examined in this report highlights that women experience political exclusion in different ways, shaped by intersecting factors such as ethnicity, race, disability, socio-economic status, and other forms of marginalisation. Policies and legal frameworks aimed at promoting women's political participation should therefore incorporate an intersectional perspective that recognises this diversity and addresses the differentiated barriers women face. Integrating intersectionality across legislation, institutional reforms, and support measures is essential to ensure that progress in women's political participation is inclusive and does not primarily benefit those who are already better positioned within existing power structures.

VI. Gender norm transformation. Sustained progress on women's political participation depends not only on legal and institutional reforms, but also on addressing the gender norms that continue to shape political life. Deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes influence who is seen as a legitimate political actor and remain a significant barrier to women's leadership across contexts. Efforts to advance gender equality therefore need to engage with norm change over the long term, including through education, public discourse, and the visibility of diverse women leaders in political and public life. Engaging men as partners in this process is essential, as is reaching audiences beyond traditional equality constituencies. Without sustained attention to gender norms, gains in women's political participation remain vulnerable to backlash and reversal, particularly in polarised and conservative environments.

Political experiences

In its 80-year history, the UN has not yet had a female secretary-general. How do you view this in relation to the organisation's efforts on gender equality in leadership?

Very poorly, but I think it goes beyond that. All multilateral institutions are being questioned by citizens these days. There is clearly a trust issue. I believe we need a different way to manage these institutions—a new approach. And what better way to achieve this than by having a female leader? This would reflect positively, and the UN would become a role model for many.

In 2016, I competed for the post of UN secretary general, and we all assumed that after 70 years of the organisation's existence, it was high time for a woman to hold the role. There were seven female candidates from different profiles and backgrounds, all very resourceful and serious contenders. In total, seven women and six men competed – and in the end, it was a man who was chosen. Of course, António Guterres was a deserving candidate with many qualities and expertise. The only thing he lacked was that he wasn't a woman, which we had all hoped for from the UN as a step forward in showing its commitment to gender equality.

Susana Malcorra
President and Co-Founder of GWL Voices
Advisor to Club de Madrid

In the current context, how can we make the case that gender equality should remain a top priority?

First of all, I want to start by recognising areas where we could have done better. There are urgent actions that need to be taken, particularly in relation to the United States, where there is currently very little support for gender rights. In Europe, current priorities, particularly in relation to defence because of the conflict in Ukraine, have meant a temporary reallocation of resources. This moment provides an opportunity to rethink strategy and strengthen our approach.

It is essential to build more strategic partnerships with civil society and the private sector to continue implementing these policies at the grassroots level. For international non-profit organisations, we need to define priorities more clearly and coordinate efforts to avoid duplication. We cannot afford to waste resources; effectiveness will depend on stronger coordination, strategic partnerships, and careful planning.

Laura Chinchilla
President of Costa Rica (2010–2014)
President of Club de Madrid

How effective have international frameworks been in advancing gender equality globally, and what challenges remain?

We certainly have much more knowledge than before about the status of women, thanks in part to frameworks like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and other multilateral mechanisms that require countries to report on their progress. This process accelerated after the Beijing Conference, improving the quality of reports and the effort countries put into them.

Yet, despite a growing international focus and increased resources for gender equality, the status of women and their lives in many countries remains unchanged – or, in some cases, has worsened due to the global political environment, including in political representation. This is partly because of deeply entrenched societal norms, culture, religion, traditions, and political swings, all which can be and are very powerful. Global mechanisms often struggle to effectively address these complex local and international realities.

Dame Jennifer Shipley
Prime Minister of New Zealand (1997–1999)
Member of Club de Madrid

What do you consider to be the most significant achievements in advancing women's leadership over the past 30 years?

The most significant achievement has been the normalisation of female leadership. Women's leadership is no longer seen as a novelty. In my country, Finland, for example, the public now evaluates leaders primarily on competence rather than gender. The private sector, however, still lags behind compared with parliament, government, and the broader public sector.

Another key achievement has been the institutionalisation of gender equality policies. Finland's Act on Equality between Women and Men has created a lasting framework, and gender equality planning is now mandatory across public institutions. Finally, international visibility and impact have been important accomplishments. Finnish women leaders have played prominent roles on the global stage, contributing to discussions on peace, climate, and governance, and demonstrating the influence of female leadership internationally.

Mari Kiviniemi
Prime Minister of Finland (2010–2011)
Member of Club de Madrid

Chapter 1
Institutional and Policy Strategies for Women's Political Inclusion

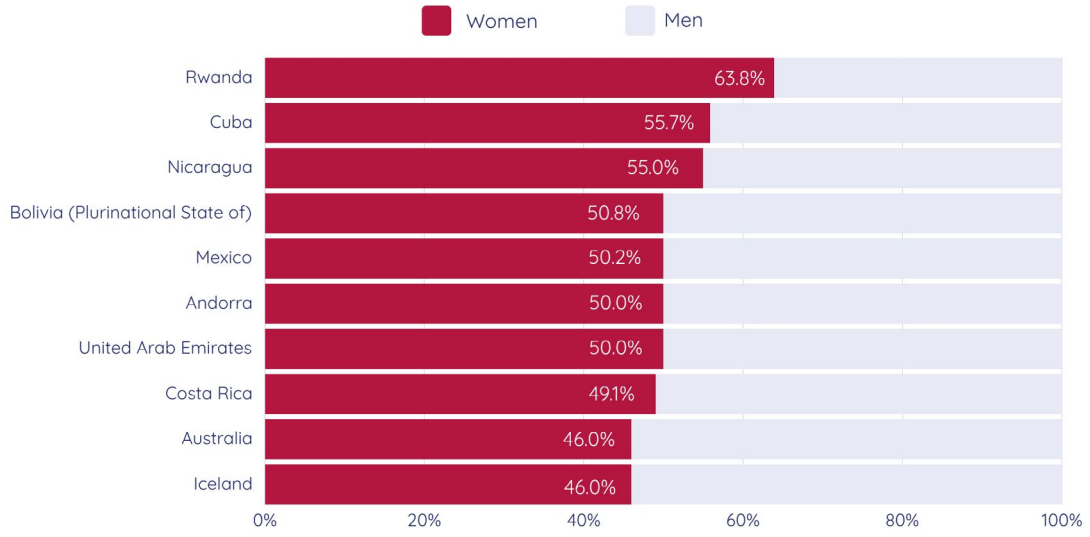
Mona Lena Krook

Institutional and Policy Strategies for Women's Political Inclusion

— Mona Lena Krook

The world has witnessed dramatic changes in women's political participation over the last three decades, with the share of women in national parliaments more than doubling, from 11.7% in 1997 to 27% in 2025.[25] As of November 2025, 73 countries had reached or exceeded the goal of 30% women in decision-making outlined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.[26] Even more strikingly, seven states had achieved 50% women's representation in parliament and 28 had surpassed 40%, indicating growing momentum towards a new goal of parity between women and men.[27] The countries that have made the greatest strides in this regard are politically, socially, economically, and culturally diverse (Figure 2). What they have in common are deliberate actions – whether at the government, political-party, or grassroots level – to advance women in political life.

Figure 2: The ten countries with the highest representation of women in parliament



Source: "Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments", Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1 November 2025: https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/?date_month=10&date_year=2025

This chapter provides an overview of this toolkit of strategies, drawing on examples from around the world. It divides these initiatives into three categories: supporting women's candidacies, ensuring safe campaigns, and reconciling work and family life. Based on these experiences, the chapter offers conclusions and recommendations for further efforts to expand women's political participation 30 years after the Beijing Conference.

Supporting women's candidacies

Research shows that the share of women in elected office is shaped by two factors: the supply of women willing to run for political office and the demand from political parties to select and elect female candidates.[28] Strategies that address the demand for female candidates include introducing electoral gender quotas and establishing political financing incentives tied to women's representation. Training and mentoring programmes as well as recruitment initiatives supplement these measures by encouraging and preparing women to run for political office.

Electoral gender quotas

Electoral gender quotas are the primary tool employed globally to fast-track women's representation in parliaments and, to a lesser extent, local government. These policies have been introduced in more than 130 countries, mostly since 1995, and take three main forms.[29]

First, reserved seats stipulate a minimum number of women to be elected. There are several ways a reserved seat can be filled, including by election in districts specifically designated for female parliamentarians, via all-female national party lists, and indirectly, based on a party's share of national votes. Importantly, the existence of reserved seats for women does not preclude women's election to non-reserved seats. In some countries, indeed, women are limited to serving only one or two terms as reserved-seat members of parliament. These measures tend to be concentrated in countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Second, legislative quotas require all political parties to include a minimum proportion of women – or maximum and/or minimum shares of one sex – among their nominated candidates. These quotas generally appear in constitutions, electoral laws, or political-party laws. Unlike reserved seats, these laws do not guarantee outcomes in terms of the share of women elected. The most successful quotas tend to be those with high percentages of required female candidates (30% or more), mandates for the placement of female candidates, and sanctions that compel parties to meet quota requirements. These quotas are found in many post-conflict countries as well as across Latin America, where nearly all countries have adopted 30% quotas – and many have subsequently increased their policies to require parity between women and men.

Third, party quotas entail voluntary pledges by political parties to include a minimum percentage of women – or maximum and/or minimum shares of one sex – among their candidates. These quotas tend to be institutionalised in party constitutions and statutes, but they may also exist in less formal forms as well. With little outside oversight, these quotas are highly varied in terms of their impact on the numbers of party women elected, while their overall impact depends on the

size of the party that adopts them. These measures were originally most common in left-wing parties in western Europe, but today they have been adopted by parties across the ideological spectrum in all regions of the world.[30]

While not all quotas are equally effective in electing more women, there is a strong correlation between the use of quotas and high levels of women's representation. Countries with the greatest shares of women in parliament all use some type of quota policy (Table 1). According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union's Women in Parliament: 1995–2025 report, elections held in 2024 produced parliamentary chambers with an average of 31.2% women members where there was a quota, compared with an average of 16.8% women where there was none. Data from the 2023 electoral cycle further indicate that the highest shares of women elected – 33.5% – were in chambers that had both legislative and party quotas.[31]

Table 1: Use of gender quotas in the ten countries with the highest representation of women in parliament

Country and ranking	Type of quota
1. Rwanda	Legislative quotas and reserved seats
2. Cuba	None
3. Nicaragua	Legislative quotas
4. Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Legislative quotas
5. Mexico	Legislative quotas
6=. Andorra	Legislative quotas
6=. United Arab Emirates	Reserved seats
8. Costa Rica	Legislative quotas
9. Australia	Party quotas (voluntary)
10. Iceland	Party quotas (voluntary)

Source: Global Database of Gender Quotas, International IDEA, Inter-Parliamentary Union and Stockholm University, 2025, https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas-database.

Political financing

Various political financing measures have also been introduced globally to expand women's political participation (see box). In countries where political parties are publicly funded, some parliaments have passed regulations that tie access to these funds to the increased nomination and election of women.[32] These measures can take three forms. One approach is to sanction parties that do not nominate women by removing or reducing their access to state funding. Many of these policies are linked to the implementation of gender quotas, with parties losing a share of their public funding if they do not respect the quota requirements.

A second approach is to use state funding to create incentives for parties. Parties receive a bonus for including women on their lists or, in a growing number of cases, for electing a certain proportion of women to seats in parliament and/or local government. While the use of these funds for party activities is usually not specified, in several countries parties are required to spend public subsidies on activities that support women's political participation, including strengthening women's organisations or funding leadership programmes for women.

In other countries, where political parties must take steps to raise their own funds, parties may support women's candidacies in a third way: by assisting women with their campaign costs, including childcare expenses. Where parties do not engage in such activities, civil society organisations may engage in fundraising to support female candidates who represent particular parties or espouse specific policy positions.

Examples of political financing measures to support women in politics

Sanctions
In Ireland, political parties that do not nominate at least 40% women and 40% men are subject to a 50% reduction in their state funding.

Incentives
In Ethiopia, the amount of financial support that a political party receives is determined by various factors, including the number of female candidates it nominates, the number of female party members, and the number of women elected.

Earmarking
In Chile, political parties are eligible to receive an additional amount of state subsidies in relation to the number of women who have been elected to parliament. This amount is to be used to promote the women's inclusion and participation in politics.

Training and mentoring programmes

To encourage women to run for office, political parties as well as various national and international non-governmental organisations have developed training programmes to enhance the capacities of female candidates. These programmes, importantly, do not assume that women are not qualified to hold office; rather, the assumption is that women tend to lack the information and confidence to manage political campaigns. Such training is generally offered to women considering running for office, with the goals of encouraging them to put forward their candidacy and helping them organise their bid for office.

The topics covered in these training courses typically include fostering motivation, improving public speaking, demystifying the campaign process, and networking with other female leaders and candidates. In some cases, more experienced female leaders serve as mentors to women who are new to the political process by sharing their knowledge and helping them expand their support networks.

Recruitment initiatives

In addition to training programmes, which may serve the purpose of recruiting women to stand as candidates, some political parties and civil society organisations have devised further strategies to recruit women to run for office. Faced with pressures to elect more women, some parties have re-examined their candidate selection processes to make them more merit-based; for example, by publicising selection meetings more widely, asking applicants about their political knowledge, and requiring all applicants to give a public speech, in place of simply choosing candidates based on more hidden and exclusive party networks. Another tactic, used in several countries, is to put together lists with the names and CVs of potential female candidates. This has the dual purpose of identifying women who might be recruited while combatting claims that parties cannot find any qualified women.

Ensuring safe campaigns

Violence against women in politics is increasingly recognised around the world as a barrier to women's political participation. This violence may take a variety of forms, including physical attacks, online threats and harassment, sexual assault, and destruction of property. It may also entail using digitally altered videos and photos to spread gendered disinformation about female candidates and leaders. Growing evidence from around the world suggests that such forms of abuse, intimidation, and harassment may lead women to leave politics, undercut their effectiveness in elected office, and discourage other women from engaging in the political arena.[33]

Legal reforms

Parliaments in several countries, mostly in Latin America, have begun to debate laws to punish violence and harassment that target women with the aim of reducing their participation in parliament and elections more broadly. These legal reforms define political violence and harassment as crimes and impose sanctions on the perpetrators, including fines, prison sentences, and disqualification from standing as political candidates.

In other parts of the world, election laws have been revised to prohibit the use of hate speech in political campaigns, with punishments such as fines, candidate disqualifications, and even the decertification of political parties. To tackle the specific case of sexual harassment, several parliaments have established codes of conduct for parliamentarians, officers, and staff to set out procedures for handling harassment claims.

Political-party measures

Harassment and violence are a problem not only in parliaments but also in political parties. Indeed, some evidence suggests that women are more likely to face violence from someone in their own party.[34] In some countries, growing awareness of abuse and bullying in politics has prompted political parties to introduce or revise their codes of conduct to address these problems. Specific measures vary, but provisions in these codes of conduct include creating rules that govern acceptable behaviour at political meetings and establishing mechanisms to deal with harassment claims within the party.

Reconciling work and family life

A third set of strategies focuses on the private obligations that may shape women's ability to participate fully and equally in political life. Questions of work-life balance have led to greater attention on ways in which parliaments can become more gender-sensitive and more attractive places to work for both women and men.[35] These steps include rethinking how legislatures work to make it easier to combine work and family life.

Family-friendly working hours

Many parliaments work late into the night, precluding members from being at home with their family in the evening. Several legislatures have recognised that this is a problem – especially for women, as societal expectations often place a greater burden on them for such tasks as preparing dinner and putting children to bed – and have established new rules for their working hours. Changes include avoiding evening sittings to enable politicians to be with their family, and fixing voting at designated times of the week to ensure greater predictability.

Childcare and parental leave

A growing number of legislatures worldwide have created childcare centres or other facilities to enable parents in parliament to care for young children. This includes spaces for children to play, high chairs in cafeterias, and baby-changing tables in toilets. Until recently, few political institutions anywhere in the world permitted members to take parental leave. This pattern has started to change as some countries have introduced formal paid parental leave for parliamentarians and even cabinet members. In some instances, this requires a temporary replacement to be appointed; in others, the position is simply left open for a period of months.

Proxy voting

Parental leave to give birth or care for a newborn baby raises questions about who will represent constituents when a representative is on leave or otherwise unavailable because of caring responsibilities. Several parliaments have reformed their rules of procedure to permit proxy voting in cases of pregnancy and parental leave. These arrangements assist representatives in continuing to carry out their political responsibilities while enabling them to fulfil their caring duties.

Conclusions and recommendations

Globally, women's political participation has increased dramatically over the last 30 years. This shift has not been uniform across countries, however. States that have witnessed the greatest gains are those where actors at the government, political-party, and grassroots levels have taken concrete steps to promote the nomination and election of female candidates. Based on international best practices, this chapter offers the following four recommendations.

First, institutions should introduce or reform quota policies to provide for 50:50 representation of women and men. For these policies to be most effective, they should set placement requirements and impose strong sanctions on political parties that do not comply.

Second, institutions should consider introducing laws that tie access to public financing to the selection and election of female candidates. Where possible, funds should be designated to support the training of women to run for political office.

Third, governments should draft legislation to prohibit violence and harassment in political campaigns. They should also mandate that political institutions must establish meaningful codes of conduct and other procedures to prevent and punish acts of violence and harassment.

Finally, institutions should implement measures to enable political representatives to reconcile work and family responsibilities, examine ways to reorganise schedules, set up facilities, and provide options for parental leave, childcare, and proxy voting. Together, these policies would make politics an attractive occupation for both women and men.

Mona Lena Krook is a distinguished professor of political science and the chair of the Women and Politics Ph.D. programme at Rutgers University.

Political experiences

How would you assess the existing monitoring mechanisms to measure progress towards gender equality?

Implementation should not be solely in the hands of political leaders and governments; civil society must also be included, as it can play a significant role. Together with citizens, civil society can create an important accountability framework. The ownership of societies is vital, as they often play a key role in advancing policies, gathering data, and planning.

Another critical aspect is investment. We repeat over and over again that gender is a cross-cutting issue. It is not only about representation but also, for instance, climate adaptation and resilience building, especially since women are more likely to be affected by climate-related disasters. Yet, it is uncertain whether we are making adequate investments to support women in addressing these challenges. I believe there is still a significant gap between policy and implementation. The critical issue lies in the level of resources and investments needed for objectives to become a reality.

María Fernanda Espinosa
73rd President of the United Nations General Assembly
Advisor to Club de Madrid

What do you consider the most influential initiative in advancing women's political leadership?

The Beijing Platform for Action has been the most impactful. It forced the global community to recognise that women's rights are not a niche or marginal issue, but are central to all political decision-making. In my view, that alone represents a major achievement in advancing women's leadership across all sectors of society.

Beijing also helped raise awareness of the structural and gender-based violence that women face in public life. Yet, despite this progress, men continue to dominate political power: only a small group of countries have ever been led by women. Even within the United Nations, we have yet to see a woman serve as secretary-general, highlighting that progress in women's representation is far from automatic.

Tarja Kaarina Halonen
President of Finland (2000– 2012)
Member of Club de Madrid

Chapter 2
Dismantling Oppression and Advancing Women's Political Participation

Aarti Narsee

Dismantling Oppression and Advancing Women's Political Participation

— Aarti Narsee

As discussed in Chapter 1, recent years have seen efforts to boost women's political participation through both legal and extra-legal measures, including parity laws for electoral candidate lists, gender quotas, and the training and development of women within political parties.[36] Despite these efforts, challenges to women's political participation remain and are reinforced by interconnected systems of oppression, including capitalism, colonialism, and hetero-patriarchy. For example, although many women have entered political office, they often face serious challenges that constrain their participation. Research by the #ShePersisted campaign, which aims to address gendered disinformation against women in politics, found that such disinformation is weaponised to undermine women's participation and freedom of expression.[37]

Not only does this have a chilling effect on the politicians targeted, it also drives political violence, fosters hate, and discourages young women from entering politics. Often, attacks on women politicians go a step further by personally targeting their family members with sexual violence. Furthermore, the entry of women into politics does not necessarily translate into meaningful participation. This may be due to a variety of factors, including social, economic, and political ones.

Beyond political office, there have been some attempts to explore innovative ways to enhance women's political participation. These include, on the one hand, digital platforms and other forms of engagement, such as citizens' assemblies, and, on the other, mobilisation and movement building. Across the globe, women continue to build movements and coalitions, and to mobilise on the streets to demand policy and systemic change.

Yet, the global shrinking of civic space poses a challenge to women's political participation.[38] When women mobilise, they are likely to be met by disproportionate restrictions from governments and non-state actors that attempt to silence them. Research by the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation on the state of women human rights defenders in 2023 confirmed a deteriorating situation for women and queer rights activists, who are more likely to face sexual and gender-based violence and are subjected to verbal abuse, surveillance, and online violence. What is more, women at the intersections of gender, race, class, and other forms of oppression are more likely to experience harsher restrictions.[39]

Since women and LGBTQI+ are often poorly represented at all levels of formal decision-making, they are pushed to call for change through activist movements or civil society groups. And when civic space deteriorates, women and queer rights activists have little access to platforms that enable them to advocate for change from decision-makers. Therefore, a thriving civic space is

an important precondition to ensure women's political participation. Any strategies for promoting women's engagement must be grounded in an intersectional feminist approach and aimed at disrupting and tackling oppressive systems enabled by capitalism, colonialism, and hetero-patriarchy.

Women's political participation as decision-makers

What happens when women's political participation leads to a seat at the decision-making table? Does having a woman in political office translate into better policies for women?

The evidence is mixed at best. According to data by the UN, as of September 2025 only 29 countries were led by women, while 107 had never had a women leader.[40] In Africa, women's representation in parliaments increased by just one percentage point from 25% in 2021 to 26% in 2025, with huge variations among countries. While Rwanda has the highest rate of women in its parliament with 63%, Nigeria has the lowest rate of only 4%.[41]

The Africa Barometer 2024 for Women's Political Participation found that several challenges discourage women's engagement. These include patriarchal and religious influences, with women expected to fulfil traditional gender roles as mothers and wives while balancing professional and care demands. When women do enter politics, a lack of economic resources and so-called boys' networks in political parties limit their potential. Furthermore, women are subjected to gendered online violence.[42] In a 2021 study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, 80% of the female parliamentarians interviewed in 50 African countries reported having experienced psychological violence, 67% had faced sexist behaviour or remarks, and 40% had suffered sexual harassment.[43]

In 2019, the South African government was hailed when its cabinet reached gender parity for the first time in the country's democratic history, joining ten other nations. South Africa currently relies on voluntary quotas by political parties to address issues of gender equality in political leadership.[44] The outcome of the 2024 general election, in which 55% of registered voters were women, led to the formation of a government of national unity. But the cabinet now consists of only 40% women, while the number of female parliamentarians declined from 46% in 2020 to 44% now.[45] One could argue that when it comes to politics, the first area to be compromised is gender parity.[46]

The existence of a fair representation of women in government has not prevented persistent misogyny in South African politics. In a country with one of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world, South African women have limited opportunities to participate safely in public spaces.[47] Gender parity in the parliament has not led to a positive response to feminist demands. For example, women's rights activists have repeatedly criticised the lack of implementation of existing laws to tackle gender-based violence and femicide and have demanded increased funding.[48] In November 2025, the government declared gender-based violence and femicide a national disaster.[49] Yet concerns remain about how this will translate into action for survivors.[50] This case illustrates how quotas do not have the intended impact if oppressive systems and structural inequalities remain.

In a positive example, after years of feminist mobilisation, Chile made history with the first constitutional convention in which men and women held an equal number of seats.[51] The country went a step further in 2022 by tabling a feminist draft constitution.[52] The text was not merely feminist in name but tackled important issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights as well as a universal care system that would include state funding for childcare and elderly care.

Although the draft constitution failed to pass, important lessons can be learned from the process. In particular, there were attempts to eliminate the so-called masculine blueprint in political institutions – a term that refers to structures that legitimise men's place as parliamentarians and privileges men by enhancing their power and advantage. For example, in the convention, women parliamentarians sought to influence the traditional structures and procedures that often shut them out. They created a feminist procedural code to address several challenges that limit women's participation, such as the care burden, by providing on-site day care and childcare stipends. The code also introduced steps to sanction gender-based harassment.[53] The Chilean case illustrates some crucial steps in dismantling underlying structures to enable women's participation.

Innovative attempts at political participation

In recent years, there has been a shift to experiment with different forms of political participation beyond elections, such as digital platforms for consultations, expert panels, citizens' initiatives and petitions, and citizens' assemblies.

However, these forms of participation have approached inclusion in a tokenistic manner, because they have largely failed to deal with structures of oppression, including capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism. In one example, indigenous women criticised the Australian government over a lack of thorough consultation on a violence prevention policy review. While the women were invited to an initial consultation meeting, none was included in the panel put together to review and make recommendations on the policy.[54] Such an approach not only erased the significantly higher rates of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, which are deeply rooted in colonial history, but also invited these women to participate as mere tokens without giving them a seat at the decision-making table.[55]

Online political participation may result in broader public reach, because it requires a lower time commitment than face-to-face interaction. For example, in South Africa, women politicians use social media for political engagement and to circumvent traditional media gatekeeping.[56] In 2019, the Argentinian feminist Ofelia Fernández, one of the leaders of the country's abortion rights movement, became the youngest person elected to the Buenos Aires City Legislature. Fernández widely used social media, in particular Instagram, as a key tool to reach young voters.[57] In the same year, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who became the youngest Latin American woman to serve in the US Congress, capitalised on social media to gain visibility without the support of wealthy lobbyists or corporate donors.[58]

However, the digital sphere is a double-edged sword: while it may lead to broader reach that enables women's political participation, women also face gendered online harassment and violence. The lack of safety on online platforms for women is likely to limit their participation.[59] Additionally, the digital gender gap is a significant barrier to access to these forms of participation, particularly for excluded groups.[60] Women may also feel less inclined to participate in online consultation spaces because of time constraints as a result of the burden of care work and unpaid work, which are yet to be recognised by capitalist societies as productive work.[61]

In diverse contexts, governments across the world are experimenting with citizens' assemblies, where randomly selected citizens come together to deliberate a particular policy area and make recommendations to decision-makers.[62] For example, in the context of an authoritarian political system, a participatory budgeting process was convened in Chengdu, China, for the residents of urban communities to offer proposals on community development. The process attempted to experiment with the use of social media to expand coverage and improve accessibility for marginalised groups. There have been several citizens' assemblies in Latin America, including on climate change in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico and on youth policy in Colombia.[63]

Several criticisms have been raised against citizens' assemblies, including that they are structured in a top-down manner, with public officials determining the agenda rather than participants shaping the discussions. This approach is likely to reproduce existing power relations and inequalities in society. This means that women are less likely to have a say in co-creating and influencing the deliberative process. Recommendations are not always taken up by governments and there is little follow-up. Citizens' assemblies also lead to the crowding out of organised civil society and social movements, especially those driven by women. And these assemblies can exclude those who are already on the fringes of mainstream policy spaces, such as transgender, ethnic-minority, migrant, or indigenous women.

Citizens' assemblies have failed to adopt an intersectional approach. As a result, maintaining women's participation in these assemblies has been a challenge, as they do not account for systems of oppression. This was seen in the case of citizens' assemblies in Ireland, which were hailed as successful for paving the way to legalising abortion and same-sex marriage. While women aged 25–40 initially took part in the assemblies, they did not continue their participation because the assemblies failed to take into account the women's care burden: women were not offered compensation for the costs of childcare or elderly care.[64] It is likely that affluent, white women who could afford to outsource such care would participate in the assemblies, while those who could not afford to do so – ethnic-minority and migrant women – would discontinue their participation or not take part at all.

Additionally, the emphasis in citizens' assemblies on individual participation erases collective engagement through civil society, trade unions, or social movements, which may represent excluded groups that do not have access to these spaces.[65] And if citizens' assemblies are meant to reflect society, they face another fundamental hurdle. As argued by the political scientist Alvaro Oleart in the case of European citizens' assemblies, these processes fail to account for the reproduction of unequal power structures, including colonialism.[66] This particularly impacts

the participation of women who experience intersecting oppressions: migrant, indigenous, ethnic-minority, and transgender women. It is highly unlikely that an affluent white businessman, a black working-class mother, and an indigenous woman would be able to participate on an equal footing in a citizens' assembly on, say, climate change policy.

Mobilising for elections and building movements

Since current opportunities for political participation are inadequate, women across the globe have taken matters into their own hands through civic mobilisation and movement building. These have become crucial means to pressure decision-makers to hear women's demands.

For instance, in the context of shrinking civic space, diverse feminist groups in Turkey, including Kurdish and Islamic movements, have repeatedly mobilised during elections against the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Before the 2017 constitutional referendum, the platform We Will Stop Femicides launched a campaign against Erdoğan's proposed constitutional changes. During the May 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections, several women's organisations called on voters to oppose the increasingly authoritarian government. Some groups used social media campaigns, while others, like Feminists for Elections, shared leaflets and engaged with women in public markets in Istanbul.

In another example, capitalising on the momentum of the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, black Tunisian feminists have mobilised, gained significant political representation, and advocated racial justice and equality. Despite xenophobic rhetoric from Tunisian President Kais Saied against African migrants and smear campaigns against the black feminist movement, these women have continued to penetrate mainstream democracy and human rights spaces. They have also built transnational alliances within the wider feminist and democracy movements.[67]

Poland's October 2023 parliamentary elections, in which the far-right Law and Justice (PiS) party was voted out of power, marked an important win for civic movements, particularly the country's women's rights movement. Since 2015, there had been a significant deterioration of civic space under the PiS government, with restrictions on women's rights, LGBTQI+ rights, media freedoms, and judicial independence. In October 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal ruled to impose a near-total ban on abortion in Poland, sparking massive mobilisation and protests.[68] Women's rights activists, who have advocated sexual and reproductive health rights, have faced online and offline harassment and intimidation, including threats of death and sexual violence.[69]

The 2020 mass protests and the restrictions on women's rights are likely to have contributed to young people's interest in politics and decision-making. A 2020–21 study found that more women than men – 60% against 46% – have become interested in politics in Poland.[70] Despite this finding, ahead of the elections, women's rights movements feared a lower turnout because women felt they had no one to vote for.[71] With much at stake in the elections, several civic and women's rights groups mobilised to encourage women's political participation through pro-voting campaigns. This effort cannot be discounted as a significant factor that resulted in a high turnout of 74% and

the election outcome, which saw a new government headed by Prime Minister Donald Tusk take office.[72]

Campaigns organised by women's movements and civil society aimed to reach diverse segments of Poland's female population. The group Women's Strike launched the Vote for Abortion campaign, whose main message was that 231 votes were needed in the lower house of parliament to legalise abortion. The campaign targeted young people who supported pro-abortion protests. A campaign by the Great Coalition for Equality and Choice directly tackled reproductive rights, with its message "Take the final step, vote" aimed at women in bigger cities.[73] Amnesty International Poland targeted women in smaller cities through its Tell a Friend campaign.[74] Meanwhile, other initiatives targeted middle-class women with children,[75] affluent women and those in leadership, and left-leaning women.[76] In 2025, women's rights activists formally submitted the "My Voice, My Choice: for Safe and Accessible Abortion" a European Citizens' Initiative to the European Commission, which calls on it to provide financial support to member states able to offer safe termination of pregnancy to anyone in Europe who still lacks access to safe and legal abortion.[77]

These campaigns emphasised that Polish women are active agents in shaping the future of Poland's political landscape and that their participation matters. In particular, the Polish case illustrates the power of grassroots women's rights and social movements and the importance of engaging women in different demographic and socio-economic groups.

However, the campaign strategically left out certain issues, such as LGBTQI+ rights and migration. While there was much hope for the new Polish government, there are still many concerns for civic space in the country; for example, the deteriorating situation at the Polish-Belarusian border and the government's adoption of a new migration strategy which suspends the right to asylum. It is important that women's movements continue to pressure the government and, crucially, include de-colonialist and anti-racism movements in this fight.

Removing limitations on women's political participation

Boosting women's political participation requires two conditions. First, a thriving civic space must be protected and promoted. Second, participation processes must be oriented towards challenging and dismantling interlinked systems of oppression.

A thriving civic space is a precondition for civic and political participation, especially for women. The power of mass movements led by women has been witnessed across the globe. The above examples of elections, citizens' assemblies, and governance illustrate the importance of actively engaging with women's rights activists and social movements in civic and political participation processes. However, grassroots women's movements cannot sustain themselves. They need to be supported through flexible funding policies, and they need holistic and intersectional protection – legal, financial, and psycho-social – when they are under threat. This protection is important because it recognises that women may experience restrictions differently. For example, an activist who is a transgender woman might need different protection from a cisgender activist.

Unlocking women's civic and political participation means moving away from tokenistic representation and seriously tackling the root causes that hinder such participation: capitalism, colonialism, and hetero-patriarchy. As a starting point, this requires those who design and fund participation processes to critically reflect on the ways in which these are shaped by their own power and privilege.

Decision-makers must also move away from othering and towards co-creation. Women who are excluded from participation processes are only likely to engage if they feel that they are equal partners. Therefore, it is essential to create an enabling environment to ensure that women feel that their voices matter. Finally, experts who engage in these processes should pose important questions to funders, such as: Who is involved in this process? Why have specific women been left out? How can the process ensure that the same voices are not repeatedly echoed? Those individuals with power and privilege who dominate political participation processes need to be willing to give up their seats and make space for others. It is vital to keep demanding that civic and political participation be guaranteed for all women, not just for some.

Aarti Narsee is an intersectional feminist and civic space researcher.

Political experiences

Why is it important to remain vigilant in the fight for gender equality, even when progress seems to be under way?

The current push for gender equality is fundamentally shaking up the long-standing status quo, and that disruption is provoking resistance. It's important to recognise that progress is not inevitable: history shows us that rights can be gained and then lost.

Societies where women once had access to education and freedom have, at times, reversed course. That is why we must actively defend and explain the value of gender equality. It is not just a moral imperative; it is essential for a society to thrive. No society can truly call itself free or developed if half its population is held back. Real progress depends on both men and women advancing together.

Carlos Alvarado
President of Costa Rica (2018–2022)
Member of Club de Madrid

How would you describe the current political environment, and what impact, if any, has the digital sphere had on women pursuing political careers?

I am really concerned about this because I had hoped that once we started making progress, it would become easier for the next generation – and the generation after that – to move forward in the right direction. But we can see today that this is not the case. Progress is not self-evident, nor has it established itself as a natural policy direction that would simply continue.

I am concerned not only about social media but also, and especially, about how young women and girls experience it. They are often attacked online and face intense pressure to be perfect, which creates a huge burden. This issue needs to be brought into various fields across society so that everyone is involved in addressing it. We need to restructure, follow up, and take consistent action.

Stefan Löfven
Prime Minister of Sweden (2014–2021)
Member of Club de Madrid

Chapter 3
Barriers and Challenges to Boosting Women's Political Participation

Minna Cowper-Coles

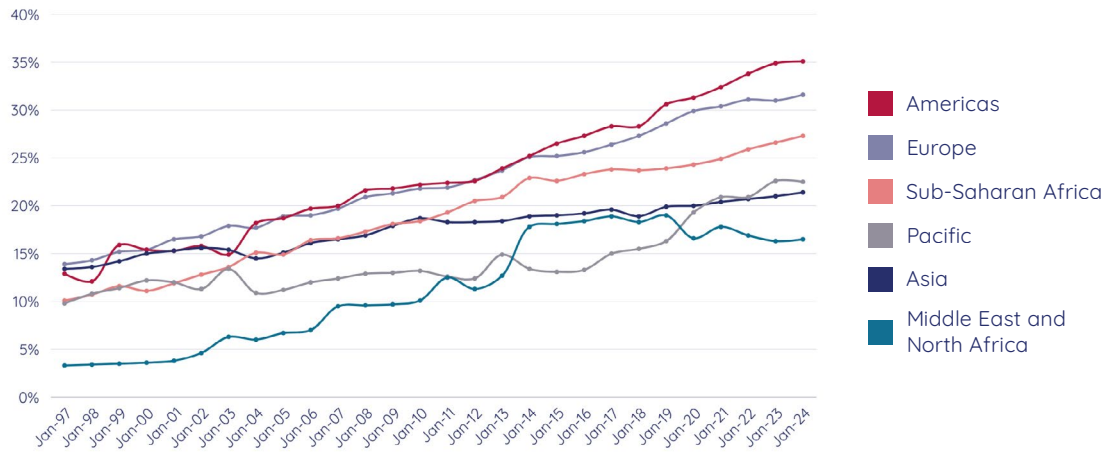
Barriers and Challenges to Boosting Women's Political Participation

— Minna Cowper-Coles

The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action highlighted the need for more women in power and decision-making. In 1995, only 11.3% of national legislators were women; now that figure stands at 27%.[78] Despite global progress, stark regional disparities persist. The Americas have the highest representation of women in parliaments, with over 35%, while the Middle East and North Africa trail with just over 16.9% (Figure 3).[79] The proportions of female ministers and women in other executive positions remain low, with only 29 countries having a woman serving as head of state or government, while 22.9% of ministers globally are women.[80]

Despite much gradual progress in the past 30 years, there have been some serious setbacks. Recent years have seen women's removal from almost all public spaces in Afghanistan, the killings of female politicians such as Jo Cox in the United Kingdom (UK), Marielle Franco in Brazil, and Amina Mohamed Abdi in Somalia, and an increasing backlash characterised by the growth of misogynistic discourse and a rise in online abuse targeting women in politics worldwide. There is still a long way to go.

Figure 3: Women in parliament by region (%), 1997–2024



Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, September 2025, https://data.ipu.org/women-averages/?date_year=2025&date_month=04.

Numerous policies – many of which were proposed in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – have been introduced to address women's under-representation, and some have had considerable success. The introduction of quotas and gender-parity laws has had startling results. Quotas can take the form of voluntary party quotas, parity laws, candidate quota laws, or reserved seats. For quotas to be most effective, there should be enforceable sanctions against parties that do not comply and strict rules as to how the quotas should be implemented – namely, where women should be placed on lists or whether they should be in a reasonable proportion of winnable seats.[81] There were some initial teething pains in some quarters; for example, where there was pushback against quotas for not being meritocratic.[82]

However, the overall effect has been transformative. Quotas have reshaped the political landscape in regions such as Latin America.[83] Some countries, such as Mexico, have now introduced gender-parity laws for all positions of public office. Other states have launched alternative measures to promote and support an increase in women's representation, such as parliamentary reforms; regulations on elections and electoral campaigns; funding, training, and support for female candidates; and public-awareness campaigns. Some political parties have voluntarily introduced quotas or other policies to ensure a certain number of female candidates or encourage women's candidacies.[84]

Despite these actions, considerable obstacles remain for women who enter politics. While women overall are under-represented, it is often women from ethnic minorities and under-privileged groups in society who tend to be least well represented and face the greatest barriers to entry.[85] Social norms that see politics and leadership as not suitable for women have been slow to change, as they are deeply embedded in institutions and practices. In most societies, women continue to do more domestic labour and unpaid care and face a backlash and hostility when they go against these norms. Societal structures remain in place, creating major social and financial barriers for women who enter politics. Further political participation requires a level of education, financial resources, and powerful connections that continue to be less accessible to women than to men, and this puts women at a disadvantage in running for political office.

What is more, the institutions of electoral politics – from the electoral system to political parties, parliaments, and local councils – continue to be shaped around the default politician being male. This means that women often face patriarchal traditions and cultures as well as a lack of facilities and structures to support women's entry into politics. Finally, and importantly, there has been a rise and evolution in how women in politics have been targeted with violence, threats, and harassment, offline and online. Online abuse is recognised as a factor that drives women out of politics.[86] Unfortunately, despite the introduction in the last few years of measures intended to prevent violence against and harassment of women in politics, the numbers of female politicians who report having received physical and online abuse remain worryingly high.

Barriers and challenges

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action identified many of the main obstacles that women face and pointed out that an "unequal division of labour and responsibilities within households"

was at the root of inequality in decision-making positions.[87] The role of gatekeepers and the effect of violence against women in politics were introduced only in later reviews.

Social structures, norms, and stereotypes

Cultural patterns are the most pervasive and unyielding barriers to women's political participation.[88] Gendered norms result in politics being seen as an unsuitable domain for women and can reproduce stereotypes about women's abilities. This leads women either to exclude themselves from politics or, if they do engage, to face overly critical media coverage, including scrutiny of their appearance and personal lives.[89] In some societies, from east Asia to eastern Europe to south Asia, the price women pay to enter politics can be even higher, including accusations about their morality and respectability for spending too much time outside the home or working alongside men.[90]

That women are seen to have lower levels of political ambition is often given as a primary cause of the lower levels of women's representation. But this phenomenon must be understood in the wider societal context that makes the prospect of entering politics considerably less appealing for women than for men. The presence of female political leaders, who by their presence disprove many of the assumptions about politics not being suitable for women and break down the stereotypes about women's abilities, often leads to less negative views of women as leaders.[91] The presence of female leaders also results in an increase in the number of women who take an interest in, or aspire to enter, politics.[92] This role-model effect carries even in systems that use gender quotas.[93] The exceptions seem to be where women have been particularly poorly treated or have been seen to be ineffectual in office.[94]

Globally, the fact that women do significantly more unpaid care work than men is a major barrier to women's representation.[95] The difficulty of combining a career with family life is the main concern for many female politicians.[96] The excessive workloads and the travel obligations associated with election campaigns, as well as constituency and parliamentary duties, make this balance even more difficult to achieve.

Most parliaments are not easy workplaces for mothers or pregnant women: they lack the conditions and benefits that are necessary to adequately accommodate new parents, such as sufficient parental leave, facilities for breastfeeding, crèches, and flexibility or cover in terms of attendance and voting. For the vast majority of representatives, parliaments are also geographically distant from their families and communities. Unsurprisingly, women in politics are more likely than their male counterparts to be single or divorced and have few or no children.[97]

Financial barriers, gatekeepers, and old boys' networks

Women typically have less access to critical resources for success in politics, from money and time to education and access to powerful networks.[98] The legal and party structures surrounding candidate selection, electoral campaigns, and even politicians' salaries can also be serious impediments. Most electoral campaigns are costly, and candidates often use their personal wealth and that of their networks for support.[99] While the costs of campaigning and the distances

to work may be higher in national politics, the lack of a substantial salary or support and the prominence of male-dominated regional power networks at the local level can be equally (or more) problematic for women. Examples from Australia, Canada, and the UK point to women being less well represented at the local level than might be expected.[100]

While the issue of educational inequalities may not be pertinent in most elections in the west, where women's academic performance tends to be as good as, or better than, that of men, these inequalities do have an impact in other contexts. For example, they significantly affect local elections, as shown in studies of Cambodia, India, and Malawi.[101] In these circumstances, where illiteracy and low education rates are higher for women than men, women are less able to access and participate in politics, or be taken seriously when they do so.

Power networks are often dominated by so-called old boys' clubs, created through shared experiences at elite schools and universities, in the military, or in private clubs. Further, socialising can often take place when women are likely to have caring responsibilities or in places that might make women uncomfortable – or even in men-only clubs or while watching or playing male-dominated sports. Women are less likely to have access to these spaces and are consequently disadvantaged in their political careers.[102] When political power is buttressed through patronage networks, tribal hierarchies, or religious groupings, the disadvantages faced by women are amplified.[103] Conversely, women thrive politically when they can form alternative networks, such as women's sections of political parties, training programmes, or religious or charitable organisations.[104]

Institutions, electoral structures, and party selection procedures

The structures, systems, and institutions that form routes to and places of political representation may themselves disadvantage women. For example, because of the disadvantages that women face, electoral systems in which there is proportional representation tend to do better than first-past-the-post and majoritarian systems at representing women.[105] Women also tend to be better represented in institutions where there are term limits, largely because men tend to be the incumbents, and it is generally more difficult to unseat an incumbent.[106]

The culture in institutions such as political parties, parliaments, and local councils can work to exclude women. This exclusion occurs through images and language, such as male titles, portraits, and statues; a lack of female and/or childcare facilities; traditions and customs that exclude women; a hostile or sexist working culture; the fact that the potential caring needs of many women are not taken into account; and late-night networking sessions and events. Examples of these issues have been highlighted in work promoting, for example, gender-sensitive parliaments.[107]

Societal norms also shape the views of political parties' selection committees and recruiters.[108] Parties are the gatekeepers to women's entry into politics through the selection of candidates and the support provided to them. Women are often disadvantaged in selection processes, but this can be addressed if parties are aware and proactive.[109]

Harassment, abuse, sexism, and gender-based violence

Harassment, abuse, sexism, and violence are major barriers to women's political participation. While not explicitly mentioned in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, these issues have gained attention recently and have been prioritised by UN Women. Violence against women in politics is understood to extend beyond physical violence to include psychological, sexual, economic, and semiotic violence. These acts can range from attacks to threats to social media campaigns and acts such as refusing to pay a woman's salary or attacking her property. Acts of violence should be distinguished from harassment, which is the creation of a hostile working environment.[110]

While globally it is hard to grasp the extent of the problem, as it is largely under-reported, the studies that exist show that the numbers are likely to be very high. One study found that 11% of women in politics had experienced physical violence and 85% had received online abuse.[111] Another study found that nearly half of European female politicians had been threatened with rape or death, while 55% of female officials in a survey of Honduras, Ivory Coast, Tanzania, and Tunisia had been subjected to violence while performing their duties.[112]

Research indicates that certain groups of women, particularly those from ethnic or religious minorities or lower socio-economic backgrounds, face these threats disproportionately. Levels and types of violence and abuse vary significantly across countries and elections. Female politicians also report sexism, harassment, and violence from their colleagues in local government, parliaments, or political parties. These factors increasingly deter women from entering politics or compel them to leave.[113]

Addressing the problem of violence and abuse against women in politics is particularly difficult as it is under-reported, stems largely from social attitudes, and is often difficult to police.[114] Some governments have increased the penalties for violence against women in politics;[115] others have introduced measures to address harassment and abuse in parliaments;[116] and yet others have put the onus on social media companies to report hate speech.[117] However, there is limited evidence of the efficacy of these measures.

Conclusion and recommendations

The most persistent barriers to women's equal political representation stem from the social norms and structures that designate women's primary role as caregivers in the home. Women who enter politics often face prejudice, lack resources, struggle to balance caregiving with political duties, encounter bias in political parties and institutions, and endure threats or violence. Change has been slow, but there are key reforms that could move women's representation forward.

Governments should prioritise the introduction of gender-parity laws that tackle the issue of women's under-representation in politics head on by requiring the equal representation of men and women in political and decision-making roles. This might be done by creating a balance between the numbers of male and female candidates put forward by parties on candidate lists or winnable

seats. Careful attention should be paid to the exact parameters and implementation of these laws, as some legislation has been ineffective because of loopholes or low penalties for parties that do not comply. An increased number of women in power would be better able to tackle the other, more intractable barriers that they face and act as role models for other women.

Governments should increase transparency, introduce caps on electoral-campaign funding, offer training and support for female candidates, and fund support for those with caring responsibilities.

Parliaments should regularly conduct gender-sensitive parliament audits. This might lead to the introduction of maternity leave, on-site childcare facilities, proxy voting mechanisms, and more hybrid elements to better accommodate the needs of those with caring responsibilities and reduce the time spent travelling.[118]

More fundamentally, governments and international organisations should aim to address the unequal burden of unpaid care and domestic work in society and break down stereotypes about women. Finally, political parties should introduce gender-parity policies and the proactive recruitment of women. They can also work to ensure selection processes are transparent and egalitarian, and to create women's caucuses and networks.

Minna Cowper-Coles is a research fellow at the King's Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London.

Political experiences

Could you share specific initiatives or policies from the Beijing Platform for Action that you helped implement or advocate?

Senegal is recognised for having one of the highest representations of women in parliament. At the moment, over 40% of Senegalese parliamentarians are women.

This is the result of one of the legislative initiatives we have implemented. We introduced legislation mandating gender parity in electoral lists. This legislation stands out not only in Africa but globally. The law mandates that election lists, whether municipal or legislative, must consist of 50% men and 50% women. Importantly, according to the legislation, men and women cannot be listed in a hierarchical order, with men at the top of the list and women at the bottom; instead, it requires an alternating structure. Now in place for 14 years, this law has driven remarkable progress in women's participation in elected positions.

Aminata Touré
Prime Minister of Senegal (2013–2014)
Member of Club de Madrid

How has the digital sphere affected political violence against women and their participation in politics?

This is certainly a real challenge. I believe these attacks have many causes and are not solely linked to gender. However, it is also true that statistics show female politicians are more vulnerable to such attacks. There is certainly work to be done, and tech companies should contribute to that effort. Politics has always been rough – we received similar comments and attacks in hard-copy letters during my administration. Our policy was not to give too much significance to these letters.

I also believe we should focus on the problem and its solutions, rather than amplify these messages, which could encourage others to follow suit. Awareness raising and advocacy should be conducted constructively to avoid unintended consequences.

Esko Aho
Prime Minister of Finland (1991–1995)
Member of Club de Madrid

Chapter 4
Women's Political Empowerment: Rethinking International Support

Saskia Brechenmacher

Women's Political Empowerment: Rethinking International Support

— Saskia Brechenmacher

In the three decades since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, women's political empowerment has become an important priority for international assistance. Recognising that democratic reform on its own does not ensure gender equality in political life, international actors engaged in transnational democracy support have developed targeted policies and aid programmes to promote women's equal political participation, representation, and leadership. Such activities amounted to $923.8 million in aid spending in 2022 alone.[119]

These efforts have achieved some tangible successes. Quota reforms have proliferated worldwide, thanks in no small part to the norm-setting, funding, and advocacy campaigns of international organisations set in motion by the Beijing Platform for Action. Many election management bodies now integrate gender more systematically into their work, including in voter education and registration drives. New international conventions and frameworks call on states to take action to combat violence against women in public life.

Yet, in many ways, the field of international democracy support finds itself at a crossroads. Women have carved out more space in politics than in previous decades. Still, the pace of change has been frustratingly slow, particularly in contrast to dwindling gender inequities in access to education and health. A global and ongoing pattern of democratic erosion is shrinking opportunities for women's political activism and curtailing their decision-making power, and an increase in far-right mobilisation against progressive gender norms is working against the sociocultural changes needed for women to have an equal political voice. At the same time, major governmental supporters of gender equality and women's political rights – including the United States (US) and the Netherlands – are turning their back on the agenda. Addressing these challenges will require significant shifts from advocates and democracy support actors, who have been slow to adapt to a changing global political landscape.

The evolution of assistance for women's political empowerment

Increasing policy and funding commitments

The first wave of transnational democracy support, which emerged in the late 1980s and the 1990s, treated women's political rights and participation largely as a secondary concern – a desirable goal but not as integral to democracy as free and fair elections or an independent judiciary. Yet, throughout the 1990s, a surge in local and transnational activism gradually pushed gender equality

onto the international democracy agenda. In countries where women's movements had previously been suppressed or co-opted by authoritarian regimes, newly independent women's groups began pushing for a greater political voice, particularly after seeing early multi-party elections bring few gains for women.[120]

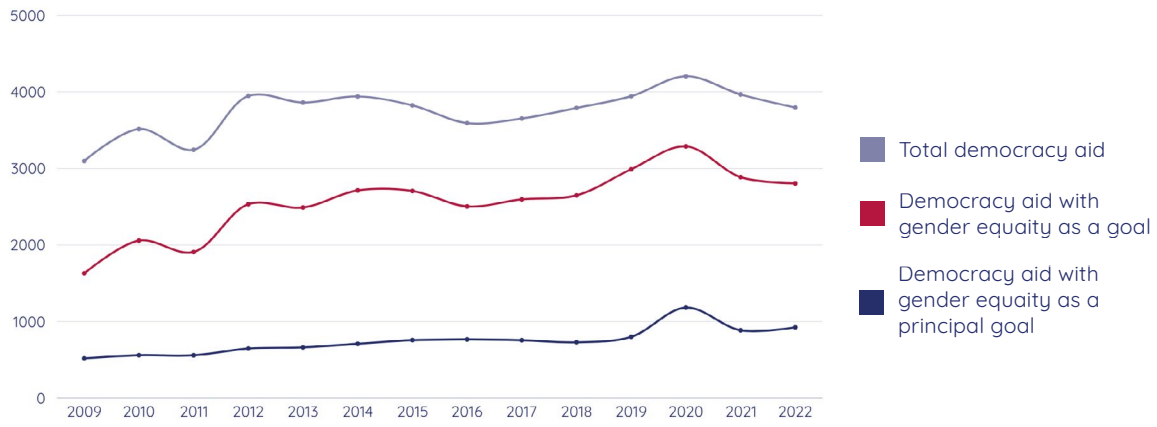
The 1995 Beijing Conference was a watershed moment that enabled women's rights activists and politicians to share lessons and experiences across countries and regions. The resulting Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action stressed that women's participation at all levels of decision-making was critical to achieving equality, development, and peace and called on governments to establish numerical targets for women in decision-making.[121] The conference helped strengthen women's political representation as a core international norm and catalysed a global push for quota reforms.[122] It also pushed several bilateral aid actors to integrate gender more systematically into their internal strategies and operations, including in their budding democracy assistance portfolios.[123]

Over the past 25 years, advocates have successfully anchored women's right to equal participation and leadership in international normative and policy frameworks, building on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), notably Article 7 and its interpretation in General Recommendation No. 23 on women's participation in political and public life. These commitments have been reinforced through subsequent international agreements, including the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals and UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which highlights women's roles in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. In 2024, the adoption of CEDAW General Recommendation No. 40 in 2024 has further strengthened this framework by affirming parity and inclusive representation as core democratic principles. Until recently, most major donor governments and also multilateral institutions embraced women's political participation and leadership as a priority of their global democracy and gender equality efforts. Several governments, including in Canada, France, Germany, Mexico, Slovenia, and Spain also adopted feminist foreign policies that sought to make gender equality a more central plank of their diplomatic engagement and development assistance.

As part of this broader trend, donor governments increased their investments in women's political empowerment. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), official development assistance with gender equality as a policy objective reached $64.1 billion in 2021–22, a 73% increase from 2017.[124] Also in 2021–22, the world's 30 largest bilateral aid providers, including Canada, France, Germany, Sweden, and the United States, categorised 47% of their spending in the "government and civil society" sector as gender-related.[125]

Examining aid squarely focused on democratic governance – international support for elections, political parties, and legislatures; democratic participation and civil society; media freedom; and women's rights organisations, movements, and institutions – also reveals a clear upward trend. In 2022, 74% of Development Assistance Committee donor investments in this area, a total of $2.8 billion, identified gender equality as either a primary or a secondary goal, compared with 52.6% in 2009 (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Trends in gender-related democracy assistance ($ millions), 2009–22



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However, much of this increase stemmed from democracy aid programmes that count gender equality as a secondary objective. In contrast, programmes with women's political empowerment as their primary goal still made up a smaller portion of democracy aid: $923.8 million in 2022. As indicated in Figure 4, there has been only modest growth over time, up from $519 million in 2009 to a high point of $1.2 billion in 2020 and down again over the past several years, mirroring a broader decrease in democracy assistance. In 2021, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the European Union were the largest donors of democracy aid with gender equality as a principal objective, followed by Germany, France, and Canada.[126]

Since then, the global funding landscape has changed significantly. As more and more donor governments are announcing cuts to their development aid budgets to redirect spending to security and defence or domestic priorities, investments in women's political empowerment (and gender equality more broadly) are likely to decrease in the coming years – a trend I return to in more detail below.

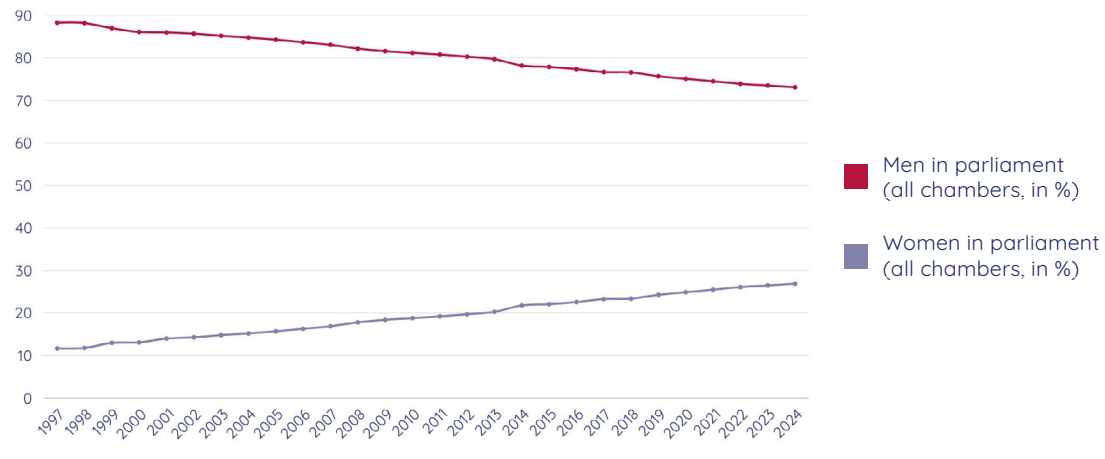
From first- to second-generation aid programmes

In parallel to these policy and funding changes, aid programmes supporting women's political empowerment also evolved. Catalysed by the 1995 Beijing Conference, the first generation of assistance focused on women's political participation and leadership, prioritising women's integration into nascent democratic processes and institutions. A pattern of near-universal male dominance in politics led aid providers and advocates to focus primarily on numerical gains, hoping that increasing the number of female voters, candidates, and elected officials would ensure greater attention on gender equality in governance.

To this end, international actors pushed for the introduction of gender quotas, implemented training programmes for female candidates and leaders, and partnered with politically oriented women's groups to run advocacy and awareness-raising campaigns. For example, in the 1990s and early 2000s, the US-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) launched training initiatives to equip women with the campaigning skills to run for office in Kenya, Morocco, and Nepal.[127] These efforts focused on women as the primary targets of assistance, centring on elections and women's inclusion in formal political institutions as the entry points to gender-sensitive governance.[128]

These approaches achieved some tangible successes. Chief among them was the global expansion of gender quotas. By 2010, over 60 countries had adopted quota reforms. By the end of 2025, 138 countries had implemented some type of quota measure, whether in the form of reserved seats, legislated candidate quotas, or voluntary party-level quotas.[129] Although domestic women's movements played crucial roles in driving these reforms, international actors often provided critical funding, diplomatic backing, and technical support.[130] In many countries, these measures have significantly improved women's numerical representation in politics (see Figure 5).[131] In Morocco, for example, women's share of parliamentary seats rose from 1% in 2011 to 24% in 2023, primarily because of the expansion of reserved seats for women.[132]

Figure 5: Men's and women's numerical representation in politics (%), 1997–2024



Source: "Global and Regional Averages of Women in Parliaments", Inter-Parliamentary Union, accessed 12 November 2024, https://data.ipu.org/women-averages/?date_month=1&date_year=2024.

Yet, the first-generation aid programmes also had notable shortcomings. Focusing on women's presence in politics, they paid less attention to deeply entrenched institutional and sociocultural barriers to power. Quotas often turned into a de facto ceiling that women struggled to exceed, particularly as male power-holders proved adept at subverting these measures. The increased representation of women in political office rarely translated into equal influence in decision-making, and training programmes could not overcome women's financial constraints, discrimination by party gatekeepers, and patriarchal resistance from families and communities, all of which worked against women's political advancement.

Early aid programmes often relied on small-scale and ad hoc activities driven by committed aid officials and practitioners. In contrast, broader democracy reform initiatives usually lacked a gender lens. Reflecting on these shortcomings, a 2009 UN review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action emphasised a lack of commitment from political parties and male leaders, the persistence of gender stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes, and women's sidelining from decision-making as lasting stumbling blocks.[133]

Over the past decade, the search for new entry points among advocates and practitioners has given rise to a second generation of aid programmes focused on women's political empowerment. This shift has consisted of two important developments. First, rather than simply integrating women into existing political structures, newer initiatives have sought to make the entire political ecosystem more enabling and inclusive. Second, many donor agencies and implementing organisations have progressed in integrating a stronger gender-equality focus across their democracy support portfolio. The result has been an expanded and more sophisticated programming toolbox.

For instance, aid organisations have made progress in integrating gender into all areas of electoral assistance and increasingly work with political parties and parliaments to train female leaders, support women's caucuses, and advance gender-sensitive organisational reforms. They have also pioneered new efforts to change the representation of female politicians in the media and tackle the mounting violence and abuse targeting women in politics, whether online or offline. Ahead of the 2017 elections in Kenya, for example, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems launched a social media campaign to raise awareness and catalyse action to prevent gender-based violence during the voting process.[134] In Colombia, meanwhile, the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy collaborated with NDI, UN Women, and other stakeholders to establish an Observatory on Violence Against Women in Politics, which monitors incidents of abuse and helps inform legislative reform efforts.[135]

In many ways, this shift towards an ecosystem approach is incomplete. Though donors and implementing organisations have moved towards a more systemic understanding of women's political exclusion, they often fall back on traditional training interventions and technical assistance for formal state institutions. Efforts to address patriarchal gender norms and informal discriminatory practices remain comparatively small in scale, and the evidence base guiding these newer areas of work is still weak. Aid organisations also still prioritise women's individual participation and leadership while paying less attention to women's collective political mobilisation at the grassroots or beyond formal electoral politics. Most importantly, however, advocates and democracy-support providers are confronting funding cuts and a more hostile political landscape that raises fundamental questions about their goals and methods.

These limitations were echoed in the Beijing+30 review process. The 2024–25 global assessment of progress since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action underscores that, despite three decades of normative commitments, efforts to advance women's political participation and leadership continue to be constrained by entrenched power structures, persistent discriminatory gender norms, and growing backlash, particularly in contexts marked by democratic backsliding and shrinking civic space.

The next section turns to these challenges in greater detail and traces what they might mean for future international engagement for gender equality in politics.

New horizons

Challenging patriarchal norms and violence

As women's political representation has gradually increased in many countries, it has become clear that practitioners and advocates have, at times, underestimated the headwinds of patriarchal resistance. While several decades of increasing policy commitments and slow but steady legislative change may have fuelled a sense of inevitable progress, developments in recent years have raised questions about this narrative. In the 30 years since the Beijing Declaration, many countries have implemented progressive legal reforms that are weakly implemented in practice, often because of a lack of political commitment and the persistence of male-dominated networks and discriminatory practices. Women's increasing political visibility has been met with outright resistance and violence, including an onslaught of gendered and sexualised online abuse and disinformation.[136] Cultural expectations that women should be responsible for the bulk of caregiving and domestic work also continue to hold back their political engagement and leadership.

Democracy assistance actors have traditionally been reluctant to work on gender norm change. Aid programmes typically operate on two- to five-year timelines, which are too short to advance gradual processes of sociocultural transformation. International organisations also tend to be wary of accusations of cultural imperialism and favour initiatives with clear, measurable outcomes. It is far simpler to report on legal changes or the number of women elected to political office than to capture shifts in cultural norms and informal practices.

At the same time, however, reformers and advocates are confronting an increasingly coordinated network of far-right and ultra-conservative funders, organisations, and networks that are mobilising against progressive gender norms and in favour of traditional gender roles and hierarchies. They work across Europe, Africa, and the Americas, sometimes garnering the support of political parties and leaders, including in donor countries.[137] Most prominently, the second Trump administration in the US has embraced a traditionalist approach to gender issues and norms domestically as well as internationally. For example, the US government in early 2025 re-joined the Geneva Consensus Declaration, a global coalition of governments opposed to abortion rights, and US diplomats have started to push for "family values" and against references to gender and diversity within international institutions.[138]

Confronting the challenge of entrenched patriarchal resistance and renewed waves of ultra-conservative counter-mobilisation will require more coordinated strategies on three fronts. First, gender equality advocates and their international supporters should recognise that it is often male gatekeepers, rather than women's lack of capacity, that limit women's political participation. These actors should therefore expand initiatives that engage men as allies, reformers, and potential change agents in their communities, and expand on existing initiatives to combat gendered

disinformation, online hate, violence and harassment in public life. Second, reform-oriented international actors should prioritise supporting feminist and women-led organisations to counter anti-gender actors and ensure that progressive legal commitments are implemented in practice, equipping them with the resources needed to engage in much more concerted outreach, coalition-building, and strategic communications. Finally, aid actors who remain committed to progressive norm change should seek to forge broader political coalitions to defend and strengthen existing multilateral and domestic commitments to gender equality and women's political leadership and ensure sustained investments in the structural enablers of women's political empowerment, from access to childcare and reproductive rights to well-paid jobs.[139]

Confronting democratic backsliding and backlash

The second key challenge is democratic erosion. Aid for women's political empowerment emerged during a period of democratic optimism. Today, the global political landscape looks decidedly different. Many countries that democratised in the 1980s and 1990s have experienced backsliding, while authoritarian regimes like China, Nicaragua, Turkey, and Russia have become more repressive. Undemocratic leaders have embraced top-down women's rights reforms in some countries to cultivate international and domestic legitimacy. In other contexts, including in consolidated democracies, right-wing populist leaders have weaponised anti-feminist rhetoric to bolster their political base, framing gender equality as a threat to traditional family values. The space for women's autonomous mobilisation has shrunk across the board, and rising polarisation and extremism have fuelled and normalised greater violence in the political sphere.

Assistance providers have begun adapting to these emerging threats. Faced with closing civic and political space, some aid organisations have shifted their focus from state institutions to women's local leadership and civil society participation. New initiatives have been established to target gendered online disinformation as a tool used by anti-democratic forces to repress women's political participation.[140] However, these efforts remain somewhat ad hoc, and there is limited guidance on how to adapt assistance models to contexts marked by democratic decline.

In recent years, women have repeatedly been on the front lines of mass movements for democracy and inclusion, from Brazil to Poland and from India to Sudan.[141] Research also indicates that non-violent movements that include women in large numbers are more likely to succeed than those that do not.[142] In contexts of democratic erosion, one important implication for pro-democracy actors might be to support women's collective mobilisation and cross-issue coalition building at the grass roots and in non-traditional political spaces, rather than focus on women's inclusion in elections and formal political institutions. Another could be the need to offer women's rights activists political backing and spaces for convening safely, based on their self-identified needs. Defending women's rights and participation should be seen as intimately connected to the fight for democracy, reflecting the words of the political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks that "misogyny and authoritarianism are not just common comorbidities but mutually reinforcing ills".[143]

Adapting outdated assistance models

To effectively tackle patriarchal resistance and democratic erosion in an environment of decreasing financial and political support, existing assistance models need to evolve. At the Beijing Conference, advocates successfully pushed for more systematic gender mainstreaming across different areas of governance. Looking ahead to the next generation of international support for women's political empowerment three decades later, a key priority should be shifting from short-term funding cycles and project-based interventions to strategic investments in transnational coalitions and local-level movement building.

Current funding models often limit the ability of women's organisations to set their own priorities, particularly in the global south. Two-thirds of global gender equality aid flows to civil society organisations based in OECD member states, and women's groups in aid-recipient countries are frequently treated as implementers of externally driven projects.[144] At the 2021 Generation Equality Forum, only 7.5% of the $40 billion of financial commitments for gender equality mentioned support for feminist movements and female leaders, even though these actors are driving the fight for inclusive democracy on the ground.[145] Multi-year programmes to address women's political exclusion on multiple levels remain rare.

In recent years, several donor governments pioneered new funding models to rectify these inequities, paving the way for others to challenge their traditional working methods.[146] Yet, this shift now faces mounting stumbling blocks. Governments who were leading the agenda, such as those of Sweden and the Netherlands, have scaled back their commitments to feminist leadership after far-right parties rose to power.[147] In the US, the second Trump administration has dismantled the US Agency for International Development and is turning back from international democracy and gender equality support entirely. Germany, the UK, and others are cutting back their foreign assistance budgets.[148]

In this challenging political and funding environment, international democracy support organisations and funders who remain engaged in the issue should rethink their traditional project-based strategies and consider bolder investments. Supporting front line women's rights advocates with emergency funding is an urgent priority, alongside multi-year support for advocacy, strategic litigation, and coalition building that empowers local reformers to expand their constituencies beyond their traditional allies and allows them to build stronger transnational movements for change.

Saskia Brechenmacher is a senior fellow in the Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Political experiences

How much has the landscape for women, especially in political participation, shifted over the years?

I can tell a reasonably positive story. The number of women in political office has grown, and their presence has become increasingly normalised. When I became prime minister of Canada in 1993, no one who looked or sounded like me had ever held that office. Much has changed since then. Today, there is significant interest in breaking down barriers for women, not just in politics but across society. Advances in social and cognitive psychology have also helped us understand why these barriers exist and how they can be addressed.

When speaking about women's issues, I eventually had to recognise that much of the optimism and positivity that once shaped my speeches needed to be tempered. Progress has always faced pushback. Sexism does not disappear simply because there is broader global recognition of the value and contribution of women.

Kim Campbell
Prime Minister of Canada (1993)
Member of Club de Madrid

Are there sufficient mechanisms in place to incentivise and effectively monitor progress towards women's political participation?

The short answer is no. That is very clear. The problem really lies in what kind of mechanisms are needed, because many of the issues that affect women cannot be addressed simply by multilateral cooperation, human rights courts, and other mechanisms of human rights protection. The challenge is deeply embedded in cultures and traditional practices; these are very much part of socioeconomic issues and patterns, which in our era place a disproportionate burden on women.

Thus, we also require more innovative mechanisms to address these challenges. This problem is widespread throughout the world, but it takes different forms depending on cultural norms, traditions, and religions. Therefore, we need local and tailored solutions, and this should be a priority.

Danilo Türk
President of Slovenia (2007–2012)
Member of Club de Madrid

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