

UN Women

Women's Participation in Politics

Overview

Women hold varying levels of political equality across the globe. In many Western countries, women gained the right to vote around the 1920s. In others, women achieved it only recently and under certain conditions. Moreover, in some Indigenous traditions, women have played significant roles in community governance since time immemorial. Women's participation in politics involves more than just their right to vote. One must also consider their ability to hold office, to participate in political campaigns and their democratic right to protest. Along with legal barriers, women also face structural and social barriers to participating in politics.

What is UN Women?

The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, also known as UN Women, is the UN agency responsible for promoting and protecting the rights of women. One of their priorities is promoting women's leadership and political participation. The agency aims to achieve equality in politics, which is one of many steps to achieve full gender equality, one of the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.¹

Legal Obstacles

Women legally hold an equal right to vote in all countries except Vatican City, an exceptional religious sovereign city-state, and Eritrea, a country that has long failed to protect

¹ Department of Economic and Social Affairs. "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>.

women's rights.² Outside of these minimal global legal obstacles, there are broad social and institutional barriers to women's participation in politics.

Education

Educational disparities between women and men are still pervasive around the world. They are a contributing factor hindering women's political participation.³ In Yemen, approximately 24% of the female population is illiterate, and the conservative social and religious culture discourages Yemeni girls from attending mixed-gender classrooms. They also discourage male educators from teaching female students, exacerbating the disparity given the scarcity of female educators, especially in rural areas.⁴ The shortage of teachers for girls results in many dropping out of school before reaching the secondary level.⁶ Considering the fact that today, few women reach higher education, in the future, the scarcity of educated female teachers will persist.

Furthermore, marriage at a young age and pregnancy are important factors that contribute to girls' lack of education in Yemen.⁵ Prohibitive laws deny pregnant women access to education.⁶ Similarly, in Tanzania, Sierra Leone, and Equatorial Guinea, pregnant girls are expelled from schools and adolescent mothers are denied the right to attend public schools.⁹

² World Population Review, "Countries Where Women Can't Vote 2021". Worldpopulationreview.com. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-where-women-cant-vote>, (Accessed November 21 2025).

³ Borgen Project. "Breaking down Cultural Barriers to Girls' Education in Yemen." The Borgen Project. Borgen Project https://borgenproject.org/wp-content/uploads/The_Borgen_Project_Logo_small.jpg, October 14, 2019.

⁴ Borgen Project.⁶

Borgen Project.

⁵ Theirworld. "Why Girls around the World Are Still Denied an Equal Chance of Education." Theirworld, July 26, 2017. <https://theirworld.org/news/why-girls-are-still-denied-equal-chance-of-education>.

⁶ "Girls' Education." UNICEF, January 19, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education>.⁹

"Girls' Education."

Education allows women to think critically, learn about history, explore new perspectives, and eventually voice their own ideas and opinions.⁷ Education is thus essential in women's participation in politics.⁸ Imbalanced gender ratios in politics often further broader societal gender inequalities, leading to gender inequalities between men and women on the global political scene.⁹

Women in Office

As of September 2021, UN Women concluded that 25% of politicians in national parliaments and 36% of elected members of local governments are women.¹⁰ One reason for this disparity between men and women in elected office is the reluctance of voters to elect female officials, holding them to higher standards and judging them based on unfounded sexist criticism. For example, during discussions concerning Brexit, the newspaper *The Daily Mail* released a front page article with a picture of the UK's Prime Minister at the time, Theresa May, and the Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, with the headline "Never mind Brexit, who won Legs-it!"¹¹ This article received heavy criticism on social media and by other news agencies for focusing on the physical appearance of the two female politicians, rather than the important discussions they were having regarding the possibility of Britain exiting the European Union. Comments like these discourage other women from pursuing careers in politics and negatively affect the reputation of female politicians.

⁷ "Leave No Girl behind in Africa." Human Rights Watch, May 25, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/06/14/leave-no-girl-behind-africa/discrimination-education-against-pregnant-girls> and.

⁸ "Leave No Girl behind in Africa."

⁹ "What Prevents Women from Participating in Politics?" January 22, 2020.

<https://www.weduglobal.org/whatprevents-women-from-participating-in-politics/>.

¹⁰ UN Women. "Facts and figures: Women's leadership and political participation." 15 January 2021.

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures>

¹¹ Malkin, Bonnie. "Daily Mail 'Legs-it' front page criticised as 'sexist, offensive and moronic'." 28 March 2017.

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/mar/28/daily-mail-legs-it-front-page-sexist>

Another female politician facing unfounded criticism and sexist remarks is New Zealand's former Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern. After being elected as New Zealand's second woman Prime Minister in 2017, Ardern received constant questioning from the media regarding whether she planned to have a family. She responded that these questions had no effect on her competency to run the country and were completely out of place in a political interview. She also noted that her predecessor, Bill English, for example, was never asked about his family planning.¹² To ensure that women feel comfortable putting themselves into the public sphere to run for political offices, it is important to stave off commentary towards women that holds them to a different standard than men.

The threat of gender-based violence is another factor that hinders women's participation in politics in many cases. In Kenya, for example, women MPs require full-time security teams and often carry concealed knives. Threats of sexual violence are commonly used as an intimidation tactic against them.¹³ Death threats, verbal abuse, and physical beatings are also not uncommon experiences for female politicians in Kenya.

In Canada, Michelle Rempel, a member of parliament in 2016, pointed out that she routinely received comments from male colleagues that were based on gendered stereotypes. They called her emotional, talked down to her and even gave her unwanted sexual advances while at work.¹⁴

¹² Malkin.

¹³ UN Women and UNDP. "Summary: Preventing violence against women in elections: A programming guide." 2018. p.4.
www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2017/Preventing-VAW-in-elections-Summary-en.pdf

¹⁴ UN Women and UNDP. "Summary: Preventing violence against women in elections: A programming guide." 2018. p.4.
www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2017/Preventing-VAW-in-elections-Summary-en.pdf

Thus, women in politics receive unfair treatment and are held to absurd expectations, which can dissuade them from pursuing political office.

Voter Turnout

Voter turnout refers to the amount of people who choose to vote in democratic elections. Statistics on voter turnout can be used to measure how engaged women tend to be in the political process in various countries. In some countries, such as the United States, voter turnout tends to be higher for women than for men in national elections.¹⁵ In others, such as Australia and Argentina, men and women vote at roughly equal rates.¹⁶ Factors that influence gender-based voter turnout include social expectations, the existence of physical barriers and disincentives.

In many cases it is difficult to determine whether there is a gender disparity in voter turnout because votes are counted anonymously, and most countries do not collect data on the gender of their voters. The World Values Survey, which is an international research program that uses representative samples from various countries to collect data, aims to bridge the gap, but its methods are not consistently informative on a global scale. Finding better ways to collect these statistics would be helpful in determining where government and international bodies should aim their support when trying to increase female voter turnout.

Even in countries where it is legal for women to vote, there are many structural obstacles that can prevent them from reaching the polls. For example, in some countries, it can be dangerous for women to travel to polling sites alone because of the threat of physical and sexual

¹⁵ Igielnik, Ruth. "Men and women in the U.S. continue to differ in voter turnout rate, party identification." 18 August 2020.

¹⁶ Solijonov, Abdurashid. "Voter Turnout Trends around the World." *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance*. 2016.
<https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/voter-turnout-trends-around-theworld.pdf> P.31

violence. This is especially common in rural areas, where polling sites tend to be farther distances from people's homes.¹⁷

In 2015, *The Guardian* reported that 47 women in the region of Zanzibar in Tanzania were divorced or abandoned by their husbands after participating in elections. While women have the legal right to vote there, the potential for divorce made some women decide not to vote in the consequential election. Other women voted for candidates they did not support because they feared abandonment or violence.¹⁸

The situation in Zanzibar can be described as enforced proxy voting or family voting. This occurs when a head of a family, usually a man, controls who the women in their family vote for. They may do this by accompanying the woman to the polls or by casting the ballot for her. The latter, proxy voting, is legal in some countries when one person is unable to make it to a polling station, but enforced proxy voting to force a woman to vote a certain way is an abuse of this privilege.¹⁹

Proposed Solutions

In Zambia, one solution to mitigate violence at polls was to establish the Conflict Management Committees under the Electoral Commission of Zambia. This committee is set up to receive complaints from female candidates and voters who face discrimination or violence during the electoral process. They are empowered to impose penalties on perpetrators who have

¹⁷ Ballington, Julie et. al. "Inclusive Electoral Processes: A Guide for Electoral Management Bodies on Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Participation." UN Women and UNDP. 2015. p.84.
<https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2015/Inclusive-electoral-processes-en.pdf>

¹⁸ "Scores of women 'divorced or abandoned' for voting in Tanzanian elections" 8 December 2015.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/08/scores-of-women-divorced-or-abandoned-for-voting-in-tanzanian-elections>

¹⁹ Ballington et. al. "Inclusive Electoral Processes." 74.

violated the law.²⁰ This shows a commitment to ensure women's safety in the political process and an attempt to help deter perpetrators from committing crimes against women.

In Afghanistan, polling stations required each voter to be body searched in the 2010 elections. To accommodate women who were not comfortable being searched by a man, the United Nations Development Programme and the Afghani Ministry of the Interior collaborated to hire women to work at polling stations to conduct these searches. Having women present at polling stations, either as poll workers, security guards, or in other capacities, is important for mitigating violence against women coming to vote because they are more likely to stand up for other women in dangerous situations.²¹

It is also important to consider the location of polling stations when trying to make them accessible to women. Certain areas are notoriously unsafe for women, so placing polls in these locations make it significantly more dangerous for them to vote. A possible solution to this is the use of mobile polling stations, where the polls are brought to people at their homes. This avoids the issue of having to travel to potentially dangerous locations. Additionally, women are often unable to leave their homes if they are busy caring for children or family members, so this solution would allow for them to vote without facing such barriers.²²

In September 1995, the UN held the fourth iteration of the World Conference on Women where they came to some important conclusions regarding gender equality. In the section on "Women in Power and Decision Making," they note that equal representation in politics would better reflect the composition of society and make for a better democracy.²³ They reference

²⁰ Ballington et. al. "Inclusive Electoral Processes." 85.

²¹ Ballington et. al. "Inclusive Electoral Processes." 86.

²² Ballington et. al. "Inclusive Electoral Processes." 76.

²³ The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. "Women in Power and Decision-Making." *Platform for Action*. 1995. p.181. <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/decision.htm>

unfavorable treatment of female politicians by the media as a reason as to why power in government often remains in the hands of men.²⁴

Matriarchal Societies

Some cultures have reversed the global trend of patriarchal political domination. Not only have they guaranteed the right to safe and fair female political representation, but they have also run their nations requiring such participation.

One such society is the Haudenosaunee Confederation, also known as the Iroquois. This Indigenous community, which once held vast swaths of land in the United States and in Canada, considered women to have significant political responsibilities “in balance with those of men”.²⁵ Specifically, women could hold the role of the “Clan Mother”, who played an integral role in Haudenosaunee decision-making. These Clan Mothers also had the ultimate authority to remove male leaders from their positions of power.²⁶

Matriarchal societies like the Haudenosaunee present an alternative to traditional patriarchal modes of governance.

Conclusion

Women face many obstacles that hinder their participation in the political process. While Vatican City and Eritrea are the only states where they are legally not enfranchised to vote, in many other countries, structural obstacles such as a lack of access to education, dangerous voting

²⁴ The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. “Women in Power and Decision-Making.” *Platform for Action*. 1995. p.183. <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/decision.htm>

²⁵ *Oneida Indian Nation*. “Haudenosaunee Women and Equality.” <https://www.oneidaindiannation.com/haudenosaunee-women-and-equality/>

²⁶ *Onondaga Nation*. “Clan Mothers.” <https://www.onondaganation.org/government/clan-mothers/>

sites, and the potential for harmful consequences prevent women from exercising their democratic rights. Women also face sexist discrimination and violence while serving in government positions. In this committee, delegates are tasked with creating strategies to increase women's participation in elections, both as voters and as candidates. They must also work to limit discrimination and violence for female politicians.

Useful Delegate Resources

<https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2017/Preventing-VAW-in-elections-Summary-en.pdf>

<https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/ge/ge3/g32>

<https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/decision.htm>

Questions to Consider

1. What are the biggest obstacles for female voters in your country?
 - How accessible is information about political candidates in your country?
 - How accessible are polling stations in your country?
2. What are the biggest obstacles for female politicians in your country?
3. What solutions has your country instituted to increase and improve women's participation in politics?

4. What international measures can this body take to increase and improve women's participation in politics?