

## Barriers Facing Women Running for Public Office and The Impact of Gender Quotas Globally

Ellie Waibel

Women make up about half of the world's population, yet only make up about 23% of political participation globally. All over the world, the voices of women are being shut out and systematically ignored. In order to be an advocate for voiceless populations, we desperately need women in politics. However, this is more difficult to achieve than it sounds. Worldwide, women are being actively excluded from participation in government through social, institutional, and psychological barriers.

Globally, there is a perception of women as being irrational, emotional, and overall dependent on men. Societal norms push women to be homemakers who are dedicated to cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children. Even when women are encouraged to have careers, it is typically in the education, social welfare, or other "feminine" sectors. When women decide to pursue careers in public office, they are often viewed as neglecting their families and motherly duties. Benazir Bhutto, Pakistan's prime minister in the early 1990's, had to keep her pregnancy a secret in order to keep her political opponents from using it against her. In order to give women a voice in politics, we must end the notion that women are selfish for wanting to pursue a career in public office.

The structural features of political life tend to exclude women from seeking and obtaining positions. Political parties want to present the candidate they believe will maximize its vote, which means they will more often than not choose men. Political parties seek individuals who already have visibility in the community through one's career, leadership positions, or political roles. Considering community leaders and those typically in leadership positions are disproportionately male, women are put at an even further disadvantage. When women do run for political office, they are often times plagued with intimidation tactics from males. In some countries, women face physical violence for running. According to UN Women 2013, in Pakistan and Nepal, not only are women running for public office subject to physical and verbal abuse, but they also must worry about threats of abduction and murder. In Kenya, candidates running for office often carried concealed knives. They would also wear two pairs of

tights under their dresses in order to buy more time in case of an attempted rape. Often times, these women are denied protection by police and law enforcement.

Thanks to a newer trend in politics, gender quotas, more women are finally getting the chance to make a change in politics. More than half of the countries in the world now use gender quotas to assist women in obtaining political positions. The three main categories of gender quotas are: reserved seat, electoral candidate, and political party quotas. Each of them intervene at a distinct point in the electoral process. Reserved seat quotas have the potential to guarantee women's representation by ensuring that female candidates will get a minimum number of parliamentary seats. Electoral candidate quotas are implemented by requiring that a certain percentage of candidates on electoral lists are women. Political party quotas reserve a certain percentage of the seats they win to women.

Although gender quotas are an effective way to guarantee women's participation in politics, not all women have an equal advantage. In the United States, the majority of women political leaders are white. Black and Hispanic women are rarely encouraged to run for political office. In fact, these women are actively discouraged from running. Because minority women are victims of both racism and sexism, they have access to even fewer resources to run for office. This is also true for LGBTQ populations, who do not even have equal rights in every country. On a global scale, gender quotas are viewed negatively by many. Some people believe that female politicians elected through gender quotas will face hostility because they were elected based on gender, not qualifications. They claim that this backlash will make it difficult for female politicians to be given positions of leadership within parties, and might even make it difficult when it comes to passing legislation.

Putting gender quotas in place is only the start to ensuring the participation of women in politics. America, and virtually every other country, still has a long way to go. Social barriers are present in nearly every country, through the general view of women as inferior and less qualified than men. Until women are seen as more than just homemakers, there will be a struggle with political representation. Political parties must embrace and protect female candidates, as well as local government and law enforcement. We must encourage the young women of our generation to pursue political careers and change history.

*Ellie Waibel is currently a junior at East Carolina University, majoring in Social Work, and minoring in Ethnic Studies. After she graduates with her MSW, she hopes to work with foster children.*