

Women in Leadership: Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract

Although 54% of the world's population are women, statistics show that they are heavily underrepresented in public life. By virtue of their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres their contribution to the social and economic development of societies is also more than half that of men. Yet despite their participation in formal political structures and processes, their presence in decision making where decisions regarding the use of societal resources generated by both men and women remains insignificant. Presently, women's representation in legislatures around the world is 15 percent. Women have the right to vote, but in most places they are not able to impact public policy and cannot bring the private sphere into the view of the public.

Despite the pronounced commitment of the international community to gender equality and to bridging the gender gap in the formal political arena—reinforced by the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform of Action—there are only twelve countries where women hold 33% or more seats in parliament (UNDP Report, 2005). From the above statistics it is obvious that women's political participation is still insignificant.

Why women aren't represented equally with men in public offices, businesses and political parties, and if they are present why are they not in leadership positions? The sad reality is that many obstacles remain to women's full, equal participation in leadership. Many of these barriers are deeply rooted in patriarchal structures and attitudes, as manifested in the social structures of the societies, financial ownership, and structures

and agendas of politics. This patriarchal structure keeps women alienated from leadership positions based on the religious or cultural justification of their particular societies.

Women perform major jobs in term of domestic work, child protection and different professional jobs outside their home, but unfortunately they are paid less than men in many parts of the world. In most of countries women's income is highly dominated by the male members of their family and they do not have control over their own finances. The continuous and long-term discrimination against women that has existed throughout history has made women believe that they do not possess leadership qualities and that leadership potential does not exist within—certainly neither of which is true. One of the old stereotypes that keeps women from leadership positions is the societal belief that women are emotional and not tough or enough for the political arena. Sometimes it is hard to fight against these stereotypes, as they are rooted in the social fabric of particular societies.

In fact, in many countries certain professions like nursing, teaching, taking care of the elderly are the only ones open to women and they are not encouraged and trained for the other professions. These professions are traditionally underrated and therefore underpaid. Many women also accept to work half days due to the responsibilities they have at home which means they paid less and cannot make the same amount as men. Further more, they cannot continue their education and explore more opportunities, which keeps them less aware, less connected and less educated in integral leadership skills.

I would argue here that if we need to increase women's presence in the leadership sector we should start by working from the social fabric of the societies, keeping in mind the context of that particular society and its implications.

In this paper, I focus on factors that hinder the women's participation in leadership role, whether these roles be at the domestic or political level. Looking at the historical evolution of women's situations it would be optimistic to say that women have had episodic successes in leadership roles.

From early traditional and patriarchal cultures to modern societies there has been progress in women's participation in the social and political sector but still women remain underrepresented in these area. Clearly women's positions in leadership roles are not the same across the world, since in today's world women's situations are not only linked to the patriarchal structure of societies but also to the political power of the specific countries. What and who builds the power infrastructure of the societies matters when we talk about women in leadership roles.

The political participation of women has been increased in many countries, and according to research from various reliable sources, quotas work directly and efficiently to open the political arena to more women. Further, much research has found that quotas have dramatically increased the number of women in decision-making positions. It increased women's political participation in countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, Morocco, Jordan, Indonesia, Belgium, and South Africa. Besides this success, it is still the case that women's participation in politics has been symbolic in many countries. This historic exclusion of women from political structures and processes is the result of multiple structural, functional and personal factors that vary in different social contexts across countries. However, beyond these specificities of national and local contexts, there

is a generic issue in women's political participation that relates to the wider context of national and international politics.

There are three approaches to women's leadership role:

1. The *Modernist* approach to women's leadership is the elitist approach that covers a small population of women. It is applied in many western countries and exists under every kind of political system.
2. The *Reformist* approach to women's leadership is the grassroots approach to empower women from different socio-political sectors and encourage them to participate in social movements.
3. The *Conservative* approach to women's leadership is the cultural and religious approaches that empower a particular group of women associated with the political interest of a regime. This approach is restricted to a small number of women who are connected with the political movement of a particular regime.

All these three approaches to women's leadership are decided and designed by men with very little or no input by women. In most of the conservative and un-evolved patriarchal structures the role of women's leadership are not even discussed at the policy level. These approaches to leadership create slow changes to women's condition and create less opportunity for women in the leadership sector, whether it be leading a civil society organization, political party or a business.

Stereotyping leadership as the characteristics confined to only men, which is obvious in many social sectors like family structure, religious institutes and in most countries education, makes women accept and agree to cultural stereotypes against women in

leadership position. I strongly argue that women have strong leadership skills based on the nature of woman as a mother. They can be organized, pre-planned and strong in making decisions, since their nature as a mother promotes those characteristics.

Some societies justify women's role absence in leadership position through religious lenses, which often condemns women's roles in leadership. Most common examples are women leadership in religious sectors, like churches and Mosques where women cannot take leading roles. In some religious extremist ideologies like Taliban women's leadership is considered similar to sin. Patriarchy based on its hard and religious interpretation is the strongest and the most obvious factor that restricts women's participation in the socio-political sector and restricts the women's movement.

Here I would like to argue that structural and functional constraints faced by women are shaped by social and political relations in a society. The main causes of women's socio-political exclusion is rooted in (a) ideological beliefs, (b) social and political discourses (c) political structures and institutions (d) the socio-cultural and functional constraints that put limits on women's leadership.

- Ideological Factors

Patriarchy as a system of male domination shapes women's leadership in the socio-political system. It creates a hierarchy of gender relation within society through the division of work assigned to men and women. Andrienne Rich defines patriarchy as: "*A familial-social, ideological, political system in which men by force, direct pressure or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.*" (Rich1977: 57)

This ideology is used as a tool to place women within the private arena of home as mothers and wives and place men in the public sphere. Even at home it is the father or other male members of the family who have the power of decision-making, ranging from daily activities to decisions regarding their children's education to marriage. Patriarchal ideology has a strong impact on the way people think and on how they articulate women's behavior. It enforces double standards regarding gender behavior from which discrimination against women becomes obvious. In such circumstances women have to negotiate their decision-making power within their families and their claim on public space according to the discursive and material opportunities available in their particular culture.

Socio-cultural factor:

Cultural practices play an important role in the allocation of resources by society and the state for the women. In many countries, women cannot procure bank credit or own property, and have limited access to education because education and economic resources are allocated to women according to cultural values. For instance, in most societies, especially south Asian countries and Afghanistan, women's freedom of movement is restricted, which stops women from participating in trade and business activities. In these cases it is the culture of these particular societies that stops women from creating their own business and being a part of the business world. Additionally, mechanisms of sex segregation and *Hijab* are other cultural practices used to restrict women's mobility.

Gender role, replicated at the family level place women in a hierarchy where the female sex is generally valued less than male sex because of their socially ascribed roles in the reproductive sphere. This gender status is maintained through low resources

allocated to women human development by the state, society and family. This is reflected in the social indicators that reflect varying degrees of gender disparities in education, health, employment, ownership of resources and politics in all countries. Women also find it hard to participate in politics and spend the majority of the time efforts advocating for leadership positions in the socio-economic sector due to the limited time they have available given their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. With their primary roles as mothers and wives, and competing domestic responsibilities and care work, women are left with little time to participate in activities related to management and leadership.

From many official reports, it is obvious that women often lack social capital because they are not heads of communities, tribal or kinship groups, which results in the absence of a constituency base and means of political participation for them, such as political skills, economic resources, education, training and access to information.

Political Factors

Who is in power and what the political structures are the fundamental questions when we talk about women leadership. For instance, political structures led by *reformists* have different approach to women's roles, which is more inclusive and flexible in terms of negotiating women's entry in the socio-political sector, and searches for versatile strategies to change the socio-cultural restriction to women. On the contrary, a *conservative* approach is exclusive and does not appreciate women's participation in socio-political sector, and does not attempt to eradicate the oppressive cultural practices that restrict women's empowerment.

Secondly, male domination of politics, political parties and the culture of formal political structures is another factor that hinders women's political participation. Often male dominated political parties have a male perspective on issues of national importance, which serves to disillusion women as their perspective is often ignored and not reflected in the politics of the party. Additionally women are usually not elected to positions of power within party structures because of the gender biases of male leadership. In some Asian countries female political candidates face particular challenges of discrimination, and even reprisals, for stepping out of traditional gender roles to run for elected office (UN Development Fund for Women, UNIFEM).

On the other side, quotas, which I mentioned before have emerged as a strategy to redress the historic exclusion of women from the political arena. However, the question arises about the effectiveness of the quota system and to what extent women's presence in political structures has led to the empowerment of women in politics especially, decision making and leadership skills. Empowering women in the political sector does not fully depend only on the quota system but also on equal distribution of socio-economic resources within society. Rai (2005) has emphasized this point by arguing that *“while quotas are important in addressing the exclusion of women from the public political sphere, they can only form one part of a multi-faceted strategy for empowering women, which must together with increased political participation also involve a redistribution of socio-economic resources within societies.”*

Conclusion:

I do not want to conclude that women have not been leading or they have not been in any leadership position. They have been informal leaders, like mothers who direct their

children's future, or teachers who build tomorrow's nation. But they are often unrecognized leaders. Their participation at the decision making level is still very limited, minimal and confined to a very specific role. Undoubtedly, women's representation in decision making roles at the political level has improved, but they are still under represented.

When I talk about leadership, I don't mean a symbolic representation of women without decision making power. This type of symbolic representation is called *Tokenism* in today's world. This approach is neither a helpful strategy nor empowering for women. It creates further problems for women in term of abandoning their qualities, placing women in compromising situations, and often makes women give up their indigenous values in order to fit in with the system.

There is a general concept about gender discrimination that not only restricts women's participation in leadership roles but also creates social problems like frustration and domestic violence. I personally believe that the exclusion of women from socio-economic and political sector carries implications beyond these areas. Gender discrimination undermines the democracy and stability of a country. It is not possible to dream of stable and developed country while excluding 50% (or in many countries more than 50%) of the population who are women from the socio-economic and political sector, and most importantly from the decision-making leadership positions.

At the social level, and in traditionally religious countries, women should be given leadership roles in religious institutions, since these institutions are effective in building the belief and value systems of societies. Leadership roles of women should be advocated in the social sector first and then in the political sector. For instance, women should be

given space to lead businesses, which is still a problem in most South Asian countries and Afghanistan. Here it is necessary to mention that a change is required not only in urban areas—that is where women’s participation would be only symbolic, but must entail both urban and rural populations of women. For me, including and extending women’s leadership is not only a matter of empowering women as a whole but it also must include and educate male counterparts about gender roles and equality. It is more than a women’s movement, it should be considered as a social movement for social change.

States should create resources equally for men and women, since human capacities are dependent on the availability of resources such as education, health and employment that build capabilities and enlarge human choices. Access to education, health and employment is directly linked with women’s ability to create space for themselves in the socio-economic and political sector. Besides the availability of resources, security always matters when women want to take on a leadership role. From different countries’ reports on the status of women it is obvious that women’s participation in the socio-economic and political sector, especially in leadership roles decreases when security is not maintained. A lack of security creates fear among women and intimates them from taking part in outdoor activities. This is a threat not only to women’s leadership, but also to the women’s movement in general.

Creating an enabling environment for women’s participation in leadership roles cannot be viewed only within the boundaries of a country. It must be linked with global factors. Thus, the responsibility to create a supportive environment for gender equality and advancement of women are shared responsibilities than fall equally on the national and international communities.

Without changing socio-cultural, political and economic structural barriers at the national and international levels, the goal of gender equality or women's equal participation in leadership positions will remain impossible to attain.

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