

Women in Politics: The Correlation between Women's Representation in the Political Leadership and Their Social Status

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Abstract

Women have been discriminated against by society throughout human history in different fields. In most cultures, women had no legal standing and little access to education and financial sources. Nowadays, women's rights are being violated daily in different aspects; they experience violence, sexual harassment, wage gap, and educational steering, and their social status, in general, is still weak in comparison to males. Politics, though, is one of the most prominent fields in which women are discriminated against. Until the nineteenth century, they did not even have the right to vote, and nowadays, they are a minority or absent in the political field of leadership. This paper relates to how this social phenomenon of minor representation of women in leadership contributes to weak social status and rights violations of women, manifested in the lack of reinforcing women's rights and in not enacting laws to protect them, as well as not having an impact on government decisions in favor of women. This paper relies on data from different formal governmental and academic sources. It compares women in the western world and women in the Middle East countries and Gulf states in terms of political representation to emphasize the correlation between the strong attendance of women in leadership and their social status.

Keywords

Gender Disparity, Gender Gap, Women Leadership, Political Representation, Women Rights

1. Introduction

“Democracy is not a democracy when over half of the population is not fully represented. The most effective strategy for any group attempting to retain pow-

er over another group is to make the disparity seem to be the natural order of things” (Abdela, 2000).

Historically politics have always been considered a masculine domain. The cases where women became in power were a result of their belonging to a royal dynasty, and inheriting power under the circumstances of the kingdom having no choice since no males from the same dynasty was within reach. It was a matter of blood, with a preference for males, for example, the Queen Mothers in Ghana, Queen Elizabeth of the UK, and Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands.

Nowadays, very few women are in power and rarely nominate themselves as leaders for elections. A small percentage is active representatives in political institutions like the congress or the local municipality. The first women elected as leaders often had a famous political family name. In these cases, as said earlier, dynasty annuls gender; Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan and President Cori Aquino in the Philippines are examples of this phenomenon. Benazir Bhutto is the daughter of a previous Prime Minister, and Cori Aquino is the widow of a former President. There is also the so-called term “wife-ism” or first lady syndrome. Women are becoming popular in politics because their husbands, Michele Obama and Hillary Clinton, are good examples of this phenomenon (Abdela, 2000).

According to the Global Gender Gap Report (2021), although there are more women in parliaments nowadays, two countries have elected their first female prime minister recently (Togo in 2020 and Belgium in 2019). The political gap is still the widest of all four aspects that the report covers (education, health, politics, and economy). On the one hand, there is a significant increase in the number of women in parliaments among the 156 countries covered by the report. However, on the other hand, women still represent only 26.1% of some 35,500 parliament seats and just 22.6% of over 3400 ministers worldwide. In 81 countries, there has never been a woman head of state, as of 15th January 2021. In addition, over the past 50 years, there haven’t been any women as head of a state in 85 of 156 countries the GGGR covers. The World Economic Forum estimates that it will take 145.5 years to achieve gender parity in politics at the current pace of progress.

This paper presents the development of women’s leadership and their involvement in politics in the western world in comparison to Middle East countries and the Gulf states. It aims to reinforce the correlation between women’s attendance in the government and the level of their status in different social aspects. It presents countries with more excellent representation of women that, as a result, function better regarding women’s equality in the social and economic factors and vice versa, countries with poor or absent attendance of women, where women’s status is weak.

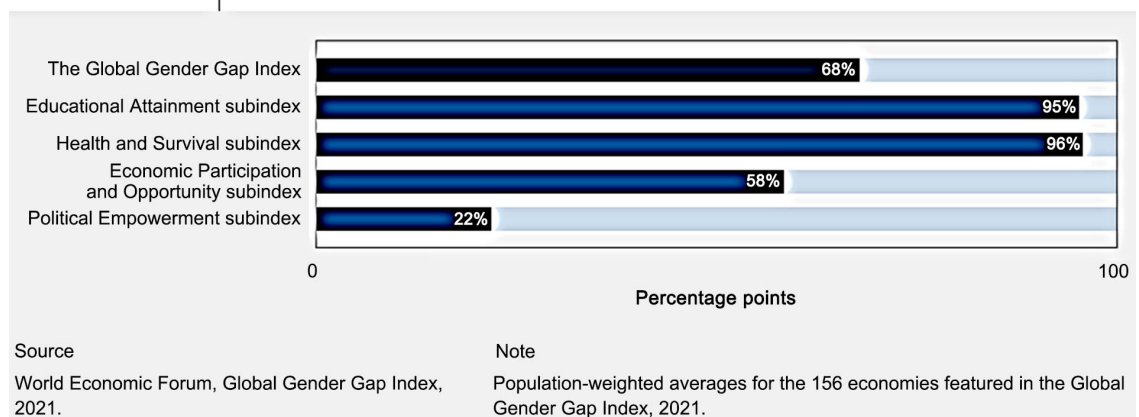
The vision and motivation in the background of this paper are a result of observing the current situation in Israel, where women’s rights are being violated or in worse conditions; their lives are being taken by their partners. According to the center of research and information of the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament), in

2020, 32,620 cases were opened in the Israeli Police; 87% of the cases were for violence between spouses (physical violence and threats). In most cases, the victim was a woman. In addition, 122 women were murdered between 2016 and 2021; about 40% of them (48 women) were murdered by their spouses or ex-spouses. In 2021 (November 8), 23 women were murdered; 9 of them were Jewish, 11 Arab women, and three women from other populations (Avga & Fidelman, 2021).

This paper assumes that the main reason for neglecting women's social problems among authorities and institutions is that women are not competent enough in leadership to treat this issue as an urgent case. This paper suggests that stronger women representatives in governance can raise awareness and promote the fight for enforcing women's rights, as well as passing laws that aim to protect them, which would finally promote their social status and dramatically decrease violence and other rights violations about women.

The state of gender gaps, by subindex

Percentage of the gender gap closed to date, 2021



2. Women's Representation in Politics and Its Influence on Women's Status

In 1979, Margaret Thatcher became the first woman Prime Minister in the UK. She was one of only 19 women out of a total of 635 members of parliament (Abdela, 2000). Since then, a dramatic change has occurred in the western world, with great progress related to improvements in Political Empowerment, where the political gap has been narrowed. Both the United States and Canada made great strides in increasing the presence of women in parliament and ministries. In the United States, the share of women in congress rose from 23.6% to 27.3%, and women in ministerial positions rose from 21.7% to 46.2%. In Canada, the share of women in parliament rose from 26.9% to 29.6%, and the presence of women in ministerial positions from 50% to 51.4%. However, in Canada, a woman has been in a head-of-state place for only 0.3 years over the past 50, and in the United States, there has never been a woman as president (WEF, 2021).

As opposed to the change in the western world, in the Middle East, in the

Knesset of Israel in specific (the Israeli house of parliament), the number of women parliament members (MKs) remained relatively persistent at around eight to ten members, or 7 to 9 percent of the 120 member house from the first Knesset in 1949 to the mid-1990s. Towards the end of the 1990s and into the 2000s, though, this number began to grow, and during both the sixteenth ('03-'06) and eighteenth ('09-'13) Knesset, it hit a high record of 24 women members. The nineteenth Knesset, inaugurated in February 2013, boasted a new record high of 27 women members. Elections to the 20th (2015) Knesset marked a historic day for women in Israel, with a record number of 28 women chosen to serve (Chazan, 2022).

The consequences of this social situation in which weak women's leadership are instructional and irreversible and lead society to place women in an inferior position where they lose control over their independence, health, and security. Women continue to be almost absent from political decision-making and policy-making committees. It seems, too, that men dominate nearly every discussion on politics in the media. This male bias excludes women from everyday politics. The lack of women in political decision-making results in a government that ignores what women want and need (Abdela, 2000).

One of the most critical consequences of women's absence in the public sphere in the Middle East region is the lack of access to financial sources, including even bank accounts. Combined with low presence in the workplace, this results in definite income gaps between men and women. Six of the ten lowest-ranked countries in income gender gaps are the Middle East and North Africa region. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, a woman's income is, on average, only 24% of that of a man, and in Egypt, 22%; in Algeria, 19%; in Iran, 18%; in Iraq, 12%; and in Yemen, 7%. Even in Israel, women's income is only 61% of men's.

The situation in which women are not strongly attendant in power, in several countries allows male politicians and religious leaders to block laws that could give women the right to inherit land or use credits. These decisions keep millions of women in a poverty trap and keep them from being independent (Abdela, 2000). Preventing women from having access to bank loans and other financial products presents a barrier to women's opportunities in business who wish to start up, expand, or simply make a living independently (WEF, 2021). However, the most significant outcome of this economic barrier is banning women from leaving their violent husbands or from having control over their decisions in terms of fertility and sexual health (Abdela, 2000).

Another underrepresented manifestation is gender-related killing, defined by the term "femicide"; the criminal justice response to most gender-related killings relates to these cases as other homicide offenses. Some countries use general criminal law provisions for homicide, murder, and manslaughter, applying severe sentences when there are more difficult circumstances, such as the killing of a pregnant woman. Other countries have put in place additional legislative provisions to prosecute gender-related killings of women and girls more specifically. However, there isn't any international relation to femicide that directly corre-

lates to women's absence from leadership (Vazsonyi, Wittekind, Belliston, Loh, & Unodc, 2014).

Child marriage is a worldwide phenomenon that is related both to children's rights violations as well as women's rights violations. According to Sinha, Srivastav, Khan, Verma, Klu, Singh, & Panda (2013), based on the latest data available from each country (UNICEF global databases include child marriage estimates for 125 countries, primarily from nationally representative household surveys such as the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey and Demographic and Health Survey), 21 percent of young women (aged 20 to 24) were married as children. Approximately 650 million girls and women alive today were married before their 18th birthday. This issue is considered rape and should be prioritized in every frame of social leadership, whether in authorities or parliaments.

2.1. The Barriers to Women's Leadership

The core of women's inferiority is the educational system's discrimination against women. It was found that the gap in the domain of education points that ten percent of girls aged 15 - 24 worldwide are illiterate, with a higher concentration in developing countries. In addition, even in countries where the percentage of females attaining education is relatively high, the skills they acquire are ineffective since they are not relevant to future professions (WEF, 2021).

Women's employment in the labor market is an additional barrier that prevents women from integrating politically. Only 55% of adult women are in the labor market, compared to 78% of adult men, and the wage gap stands on an average of 40% in similar positions. In addition, women encounter barriers to employment in the most dynamic occupations that are in demand. They are under-represented in the clusters with the highest employment growth, like engineering and project managing. Furthermore, it turns out that there are some occupations in which women are under-utilized, even if they have the needed skills (WEF, 2021).

In addition, their role as the ultimate caregivers shapes a real challenge in entering the political arena. Women with young children find it difficult to combine their primary job as mothers, the way society expects them, and running a political career that demands them to spend many hours out of their homes. The second issue is that most women have a job in education and nurturing community service roles, primarily teaching. In Palestine, for instance, many women's local councils were school principals, teachers, or social activists. Another example is Ghana, where women work primarily in farming or as nurses, midwives, or healthcare workers; administrative or clerical workers; proprietors of schools/daycare centers (Moghadam, 1998).

2.2. Women's Attendance in Politics in Selected Countries and Their Affection with Women's Status

Iceland

The best performance of 2021, in terms of gap closure, according to the

GGGR, belongs to Iceland. With 89.2% closing all the four dimensions measured (economic, education, health and survival, and political empowerment), closing already 76% of its Political Empowerment gap. Iceland has closed political gender gaps by another 5.9 percentage points since last year's report.

A significant distinguishing factor is that Iceland is one of the few countries where women have been in the highest institutional positions in the country for almost as long as men in the past 50 years. A woman has been in a head-of-state place in 23.5 of the past 50 years, second only to Bangladesh, where women have been in this role for over 27 years. Further, 39.7% of parliamentarians and 40% of ministers in Iceland are women.

As stated before, in the assumption of this paper, the intense political representation of women would improve women's status in all aspects. Iceland, for instance, has nearly closed its gender gap in the Health and Survival (96.4%) and Educational Attainment (99.9%) subindexes. However, despite boys and girls having equal access to all levels of education, the next challenge is to improve women's participation and enrolment in fields of education most relevant for the job market, currently and in the future. For instance, only 10.25% of female graduates choose to pursue a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) track. In contrast, one-third (26.6%) of the total male graduates attain a degree in these fields. This may slow down future progress in closing the gender gaps in the workplace, even though Iceland has already closed 84.6% of its Economic Participation and Opportunity gender gap, ranking 4th globally. For example, 84.3% of women today participate in the labor force and are employed in professional and technical roles more than men.

Women are also in senior or managerial positions, representing 41.9% of senior roles and 45.9% of board members. A critical driver of the high presence of women in the workplace is that Iceland is one of the OECD economies with the highest GDP spent on childcare. Nonetheless, there are still significant areas where gender parity is yet to be achieved: women still work part-time at a higher rate than men (47.8% compared to 27.9% of men). Further, there is still no gender parity in income and wages. Women estimated earned income is still 73.7% of that of men, and a gap of 24% on wage equality for similar work indicators has yet to be bridged.

Finland

Finland (2nd) has gained one position this year, ahead of Norway. The country has closed 86.1% of its overall gender gap, up from 83.2% in the previous edition. This improvement can be attributed to the substantial progress (over 10.5 percentage points) in closing its Political Empowerment gender gap. Thanks to this improvement, it has completed 66.9% of its gap on this subindex, thus improving its overall global rank. This result is due to a substantial increase in the number of women in ministerial positions (from 37.5% to 50%), complemented by the fact that the Prime Minister in 2019 was a woman. However, this is not the first time there has been a female head of state. In fact, in Finland, a

woman has been in this position for 13 of the last 50 years. Further, 46% of parliamentarians are women, the 9th highest share in the world.

A significant contributor to Finland's climb to the second position has been the improvement in the Economic Participation and Opportunity subindex: 80.6% of this gap has been closed to date, the 13th best result in the world, which is almost two percentage points better than last year's edition (78.8%). An important area where Finland has improved this year is the increased presence of women in senior and managerial roles. Women currently represent 36.9% of the total, an increase of about five percentage points. This is essential to achieving gender parity at work in a country where 76.6% of women actively participate in the labor force, and more women are in professional and technical roles than men.

Despite these improvements, women's estimated earned income is just 72.1% of men's. Once again, differences in hours worked and childcare responsibilities contribute to disparities between genders: to date, half of the employed women work part-time, while maternity leave support is about three-fourths of the gross annual wage. Another ongoing bottleneck to improving economic opportunities for women is participation in STEM disciplines, currently preferred by only 12.4% of women graduates, compared to 49.8% of men graduates. Yet Finland has already closed Educational Attainment gender gaps at all levels of education—and encouraging women to study disciplines traditionally dominated by men represents the next frontier on the path to gender parity.

Norway

Norway (3rd) has closed 84.9% of its overall gender gap, and its rank remains unchanged from the previous edition. There has been progress on some dimensions and a little step back on others. Among the areas where it has improved, Norway has closed political empowerment gender gaps by about four percentage points relative to the previous edition. So far, 64% of this gap has been completed, ranking 3rd globally. This year's improvement is mainly due to an additional period in which a woman has been head of state and marginal improvements in the share of women in parliament (44.4%, up from 40.8% in the previous edition). However, the percentage of women holding ministerial positions has declined from 42% to 38.9% this year.

Among the dimensions where gaps have slightly widened in Norway is Economic Participation and Opportunity, where 79.2% of the gender gap has been closed, 0.6 percentage points lower than one year ago, ranking the country 20th. This has been driven by a slight decline in gender parity in labor force participation. Although 75.6% of women are in the labor market, their share over that of men has decreased. In parallel, part-time employment among women (58.4%) is now more than that of men (41.2%).

A second factor in widening gaps in the workplace is the declining share of women in senior roles. About 34.5% of senior positions (legislators, senior officials, and managers) are held by women this year, versus 35.6% reported one

year ago. In addition, gender gaps in wage and income remain, although 79.2% of the estimated earned income gap and 74.5% of the wage equality gap have been closed so far (meaning over 20% of these gaps are yet to be completed). Further, Norway has closed 100% of its Educational Attainment gaps and 96.4% of its Health and Survival gender gap.

New Zealand

New Zealand (4th) has closed 84% of its overall gender gap and has climbed two places from last year. New Zealand improved its Political Empowerment score by about 15.6 percentage points, so nearly 63% of this gap has closed to date, the fourth-best result worldwide. Another year has passed with a woman as head of state, leading to 14.1 years of the last 50. This explains most of New Zealand's progress on this subindex. Other political gender gaps have also reduced: the share of women in parliament is now at 48.3%, and that of women in ministerial positions is at 40%. Gender gaps in Educational Attainment and Health and Survival remain closed, unchanged since last year.

Performance on the Economic Participation and Opportunity subindex has also improved: 76.3% of this gap has been closed to date, one percentage point greater than one year ago. This is driven by more involvement of women in the labor force (76.8%, +1 percentage points) and narrower gaps in wages (71.9%, +1 percentage points) and income (63.7% +2 percentage points). In addition, the share of women in professional and technical roles remains high (over 50%). Despite this progress, New Zealand still has some critical gaps to close in the world of work. Income and wage gaps are still relatively large, and there are still too few women in managerial roles. The split in these roles remains 40:60, with men representing over 60% of members listed on companies' boards.

The United States

Places 30th in this edition, 23 places higher than one year ago, thanks to the progress of 3.9 percentage points relative to the previous edition. So far, the country has closed 76.3% of its gender gap. This step forward is explained mainly by narrowing gaps on the Political Empowerment front, which has doubled to a score of 32.9% (67.1% is yet to be closed). As of January 2021, women in ministerial positions jumped from 21.7% to 46.2%, and the share of women in congress increased from 23.6% to 27.3%.

In contrast with the rapid improvement in Political Empowerment, there has been no progress in closing Economic Participation and Opportunity gender gaps. While 75.4% of the gap on this subindex has been completed, this is 0.2 points lower than in the previous edition. Only a marginal improvement has been achieved regarding labor force participation and the share of women in senior roles. Consequently, these gaps have shrunk to 86.7% and 73.1%, respectively, a few decimal points above those attained a year ago. Despite these minor improvements, just 67.8% of women are in the job market (61st globally), and 42.2% of managers are women. In parallel, wage and income gaps also remain large (66.8% and 65.4%, respectively), indicating that an American woman's in-

come is about 65.4% of a man's income.

Progress towards gender parity is more advanced in Health and Survival, where 97% of the gap has been closed, despite a declining life expectancy for men and women of about two years. Women's healthy life expectancy in the United States stands at 67 years, compared to 70.1 years in 2016. Gender parity has also been achieved in educational attainment, with a balance in boys' and girls' primary education enrolment rates and a more significant share of girls enrolled in tertiary education than men. However, women still choose STEM disciplines far less frequently than men. Only 10.4% of women specialize in these fields versus over 30% of men, with a meager share of women in Engineering, Manufacturing, and Construction (2.42%) and Information & Communication Technologies (1.53%).

Egypt

Egypt has closed 63.9% of its overall gender gap, ranking 129th globally. Although this overall gap has slightly decreased this year by one percentage point, the Economic Participation and Opportunity subindex score has regressed even further, by 1.8 percentage points. To date, 42.1% of this gap has been closed. Only 20% of women are in the labor force, corresponding to a gap of 73.4% still to close and ranking Egypt 150th globally on this indicator. Women are under-represented among professional and technical workers (33.4%) and senior officials and managers (7.3%), corresponding to gaps of 50% and 92% gaps, respectively. These inequalities are also reflected in wage and income gaps: the estimated earned income of a woman is currently 22% of that of a man, 4.2 percentage points larger than one year ago. In comparison, over 20% of the wage gap has yet to be closed. In addition, women continue to experience limited rights in inheriting property and accessing and using land and non-land assets.

On the other hand, Egypt has made some progress on its Political Empowerment gap, with an increase of 6.3 percentage points from the previous edition. Egypt has closed 19.6% of its Political Empowerment gap to date and counts 27% of women among parliamentarians and 24.2% among ministers. More progress has been achieved regarding Health and Survival (96.8%) and Educational Attainment, where 97% of the gender gap has been closed.

Latest data on women's political presence in the Middle East and North Africa region points that only 12.1% of this gap has been closed, which is the lowest of all areas worldwide. Only one country, the United Arab Emirates, ranks among the top 25 countries globally. Three countries (Israel, Tunisia, and Egypt) have closed between 20% and 22.7% of their Political Empowerment gaps. All other countries fall below the 90th position in the subindex ranking, with only 15.1% (or less) of their gaps closed (WEF, 2021).

Except for the United Arab Emirates, where there are as many women as men in parliament, women make up just 18.3% of parliamentarians across the region. In five countries, women represent 6% or less of lower-house members: Yemen (0.3%), Kuwait (1.5%), Oman (2.3%), Lebanon (4.7%), and Iran (5.6%). Similar-

ly, in terms of ministerial positions, no country in the region boasts more than 31% of women in these roles. In 8 out of 19 countries, women are less than 10%, and in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, there are no women ministers. Further, only two countries (Israel and Turkey) have had a woman head of state in the past 50 years.

3. Conclusions

After overviewing the data selected for this paper, the assumption that there is a direct link between women's representation in political leadership and their social status is obvious. Women's status is solid and stable in countries with proper representation of women in government and legal authorities. In contrast, countries, where women are poorly involved, put women in a weak position.

Having women in political leadership is crucial because it reinforces the need to take care of the different injustices that women struggle with regularly. It would place safety, health, education, and economic inequalities at the top of the priorities of governmental issues and positively affect women's position.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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