

ALiGN

**Advancing Learning and
Innovation on Gender Norms**

A woman with a yellow headscarf and sunglasses is speaking into a red and white megaphone. She is part of a crowd of people at what appears to be a protest or demonstration. In the background, other people are visible, some with their hands raised. The scene is outdoors with trees and a building in the distance.

TOPIC GUIDE

Gender norms and women in politics: Evaluating progress and identifying challenges on the 25th Anniversary of the Beijing Platform

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‘Leaders are born; yet many born female in rural parts of sub-Saharan Africa go unrecognized largely because, from day one, women and girls face a political, cultural and social environment that inhibits their development into well-equipped female leaders.’

Dr. Joyce Banda, former President of Malawi

‘We were afraid that men with their patriarchal mind set would not put in women’s rights, so we formed a women’s caucus to work on this. We did not always agree on everything, but we did agree on women’s rights. We were worried that men were leaving women out and that gave us energy to overcome our differences.’

Female political leader, Uganda (ALIGN research)

Cover photo: Protest march against bigotry and hate speech in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA © Fibonacci Blue

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1. Introduction and trends

While women are increasingly exercising their right to political participation, many who aspire to political office still find their way barred by the gender norms that see politics as a masculine space. This ALIGN guide focuses on the influence of gender norms in three key areas:

- women's parliamentary representation
- women's experiences running for and standing in leadership positions, and
- women's engagement in civic action and social movements.

The guide raises fundamental questions about ways gender norms interact with social and economic conditions to work for or against women's representation and the persistent influence of gender norms on their political aspirations.

Women have become an undeniable force in positions of political power in the 21st century. Female leaders such as Dilma Rouseff in Brazil, Angela Merkel in Germany and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia, among many others, have made their mark on the world's political stage in recent years. And while women have become a growing presence in politics, increasingly diverse types of women hold power. Finland elected its youngest Prime Minister, Juha Sipilä, a woman aged 34. Young women activists have been at the heart of political movements – from Alaa Salah in Sudan to Greta Thunberg in the global climate debates – taking centre stage across local governments, in protests, and as influential activists and thought leaders.

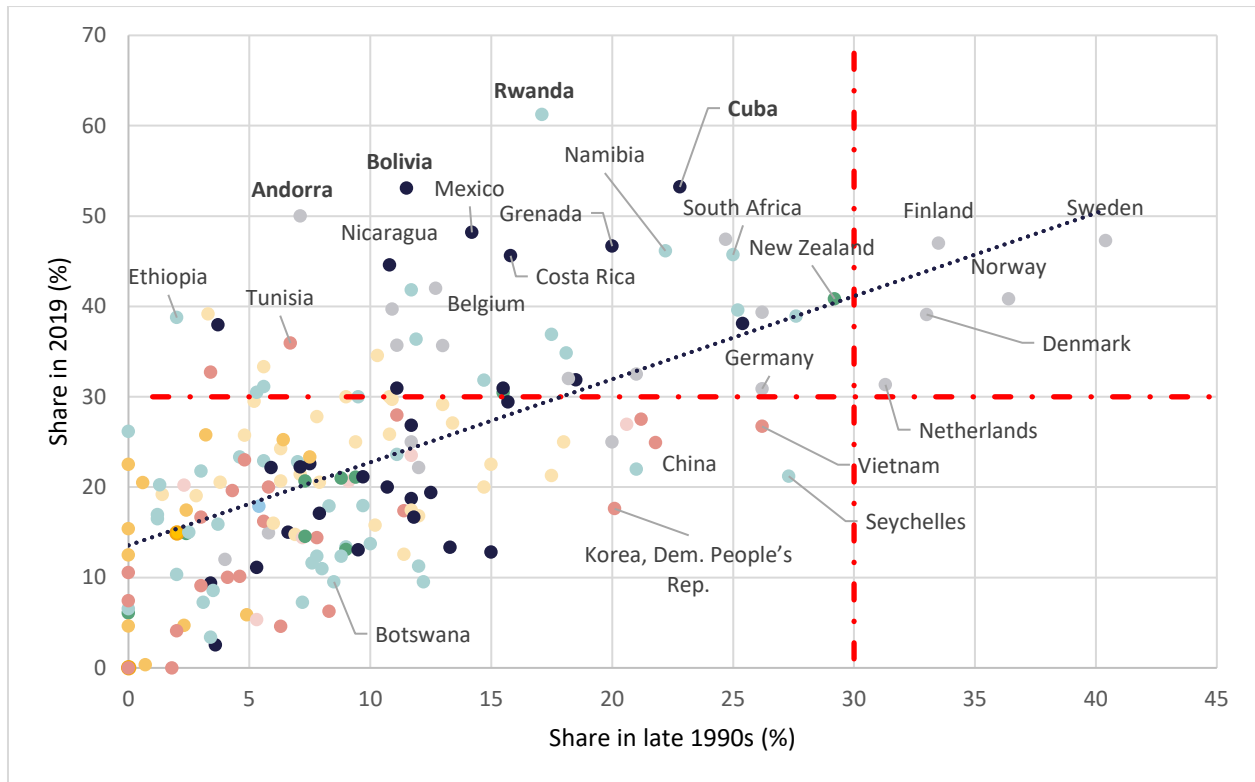
While the formal rules that impede women's equal participation in politics were eliminated in most countries during the 20th century (with women's disenfranchisement persisting in the Arab Gulf region in some cases into the early 21st century, easing with Saudi Arabia's 2008 reforms for women in politics), informal rules and norms still mean that women's routes to participation in politics and experiences can differ from those of men. Identifying and addressing the informal, often implicit, rules that serve as barriers to women's full participation is vital.

Since the Beijing Declaration set a goal for women's full and equal participation in politics in 1995, the story has been a mixture of much progress and some setbacks and persisting challenges. On the one hand, across many cultures and societies, it is increasingly common for young generations of girls to aspire to political leadership. Their growing aspirations have been supported by such factors as rising access to and achievement in education and economic shifts, although they have also been pushed through by sheer determination in the face of persistent barriers. Women's movements, and the women who have played key roles in wider social movements, were the driving force behind the Beijing Declaration itself, and they have continued to reflect and contribute to change in the decades since. From the Arab Spring to revolutions in Brazil, to Lebanon, to Sudan and beyond, women have been central agents of change.

On the other hand, coalitions and movements which don't support gender equality, including those linked to nationalist and populist agendas, are growing in power and influence, often supported by a resurgence of traditional norms around gender.

In most countries and regions, the proportion of women represented in political roles (their descriptive representation) has improved substantially. [Women's parliamentary representation has doubled since the 1995 Beijing Declaration](#), from 12% to 25%, with increases reflected across regions and country income groupings. In the late 1990s, only 5 of 179 countries (fewer than 3%) had exceeded the 30% threshold for female representation prescribed in Beijing and no country had achieved parity. By 2019, 51 countries (close to 30%) had met or exceeded the 30% threshold, and parity was achieved or surpassed in four countries: Rwanda, Cuba, Bolivia and Andorra (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Share of female parliamentarians in 179 countries in the late 1990s and 2019 (%)



Source: IPU data from World Bank (2020)

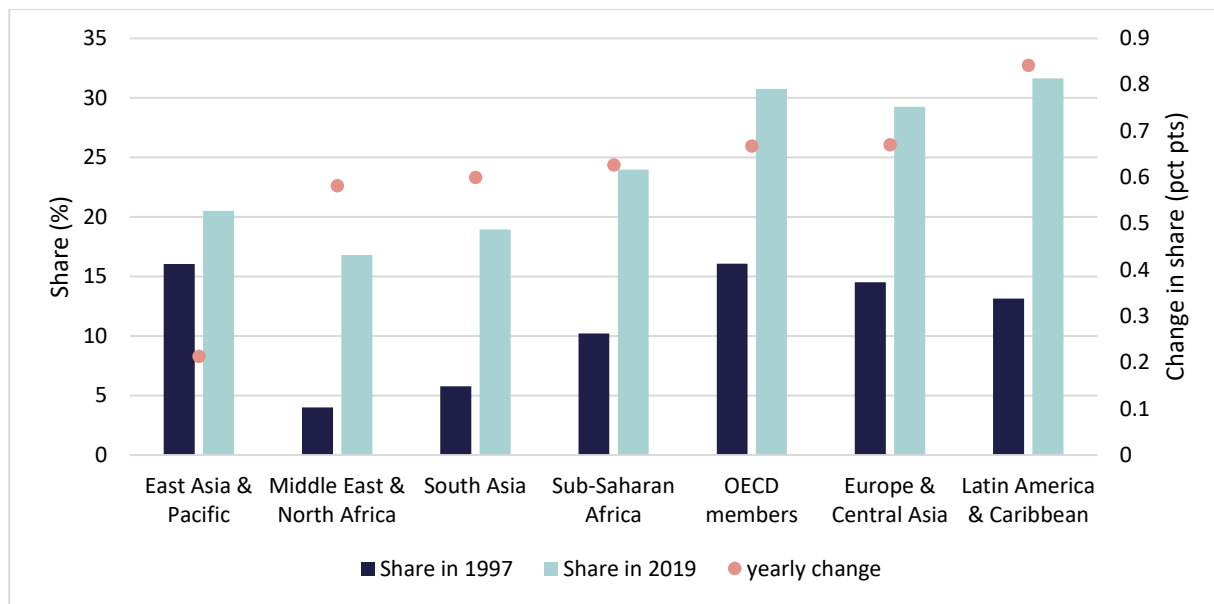
Note: 'Late 1990s' is 1997 or closest year for those countries with a datapoint between 1997 and 2001. 2019 is 2019 for all countries except Sudan, for which it is 2018.

Dark blue indicates countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), grey is Western Europe, light blue is Europe and Central Asia (ECA), jade is sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), orange is Middle East and North Africa (MENA), light orange is North America, pink is East Asia and the Pacific (EAP), and light pink is South Asia, green is Australasia. The four countries in bold are those that achieved or surpassed gender parity in 2018. The 30% line indicates the threshold for representation prescribed in the Beijing Declaration.

Women's representation in parliament has risen across regions at different rates (Figure 2). Latin America and the Caribbean currently holds the highest rate of women's parliamentary representation at 32% in 2019, up from 13% in 1997, and the average yearly increase (.84 percentage points) has been higher than that seen in any other region. Star performers include Bolivia, where female representation grew more quickly than in any other country, as well as Mexico, Cuba and Costa Rica.

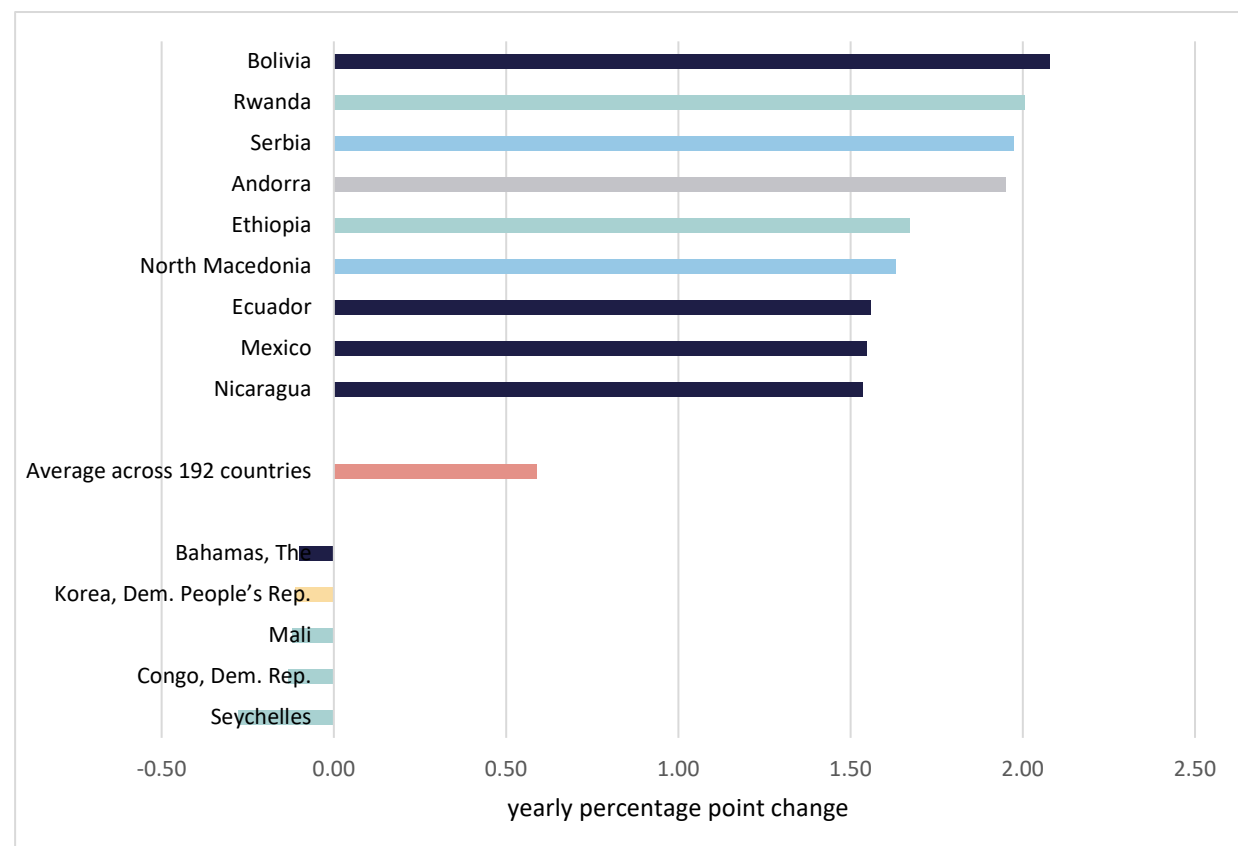
Even in the Middle East and North Africa (which consistently trails all other regions in women's political representation), women's parliamentary representation rose from 4% in 1997 to 17% in 2019. In sub-Saharan Africa, 10% of parliamentarians were women in 1997, a figure that had climbed to 24% by 2019. This rise, however, masks even sharper increases in several countries [including Rwanda](#), the first country in the world to have a majority of women in its lower chamber (56% in 2008), as well as Ethiopia, Senegal, Djibouti and Sudan.

The rate of change is slowest by far in East Asia and the Pacific, where the share of female parliamentarians rose only marginally from 17.5% to 21% over the two-decade period; largely the result of only marginal improvements in China (a rise from 22% to 25%), which accounts for most of the region's population. Improvements appear to be spread relatively evenly across countries' income groupings (ranging from .53 percentage points yearly in lower-middle-income countries to .59 points yearly in upper-middle-income countries).

Figure 2 – Trends in women's representation in parliament by region, 1997-2019

Source: IPU data from World Bank (2020) and author calculations of IPU data.

Note: Regional averages (and rates of change) are weighted by each country's respective population.

Figure 3 – Countries with the largest positive and biggest negative annual changes in female parliamentary representation between the mid-1990s and late 2000s (percentage points)

Source: IPU data from World Bank (2020).

Note: Dark blue is LAC, jade is SSA, pale blue is ECA, grey is Western Europe, light orange is EAP.

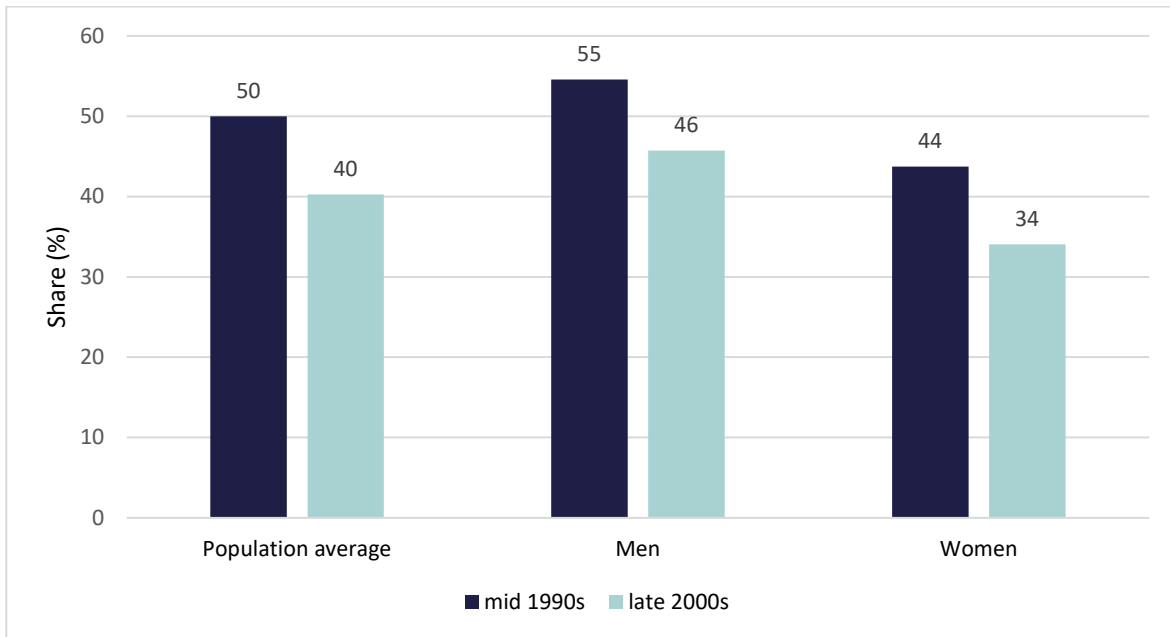
Women's representation as heads of state has also increased. In 1966, no country had ever had an elected female leader. By 1980, only 10% had. By 2017, however, [Geiger and Kent \(Pew, 2017\)](#) [estimated that](#) more than 70% of countries had elected female leaders at some point, reflecting widespread change. Over this time the share of women in ministerial positions has also [increased](#), from 14% in 2005 to 21% in 2018.

Despite such progress, women still account for [just 25% of female parliamentarians and 10% of leaders](#) worldwide – far from parity. Though projections can be imprecise, [VSO, Online](#) suggests that on current trends, women will not achieve equal representation at the top of politics in parliaments until 2065, and will not make up half the world's leaders until 2134. What's more, the progress that has been made is not irreversible. In Malawi, for example, the number of women in parliament dropped from 22% to 16.7% in the 2014 elections, and in Iceland it fell from 47% in 2016 to 38% in 2019 – its lowest level since 2007. Progress also varies substantially at the national level. In addition, there is a dearth of data on sub-national representation: the main measure available from [United Cities and Local Governments](#) finds that fewer than 5% of the world's mayors are women and that women account for just 20% of local councilors worldwide on average) but there is limited available trend data.

As women's representation has increased, reported attitudes about women in politics also appear to have improved in many countries – although at a slower pace. Data from 32 countries in the [World Values Surveys](#) of the mid-1990s and late 2000s, show that, on average, about 50% of people in the mid-1990s agreed with the statement 'men make better political leaders' – a share that fell to 40% in the late 2000s (Figure 4). In 16 of the 32 countries (50%), fewer than half of the population subscribed to this viewpoint in the mid-1990s, rising to 19 (59%) of the same countries by the late 2000s.

The share of respondents favouring male leaders was higher for men than for women, while a decline of about 10 percentage points was uniform across genders. Differences among age groups are also visible: between the mid-1990s and the late 2000s, all age cohorts reported a decrease in sexist attitudes. However, while younger people are consistent in holding more progressive attitudes towards women leaders, the largest improvement (13 percentage points) was registered among the oldest (60+) cohort, indicating that successive cohorts tend to be more progressive – on average – than their predecessors (Figure 5).

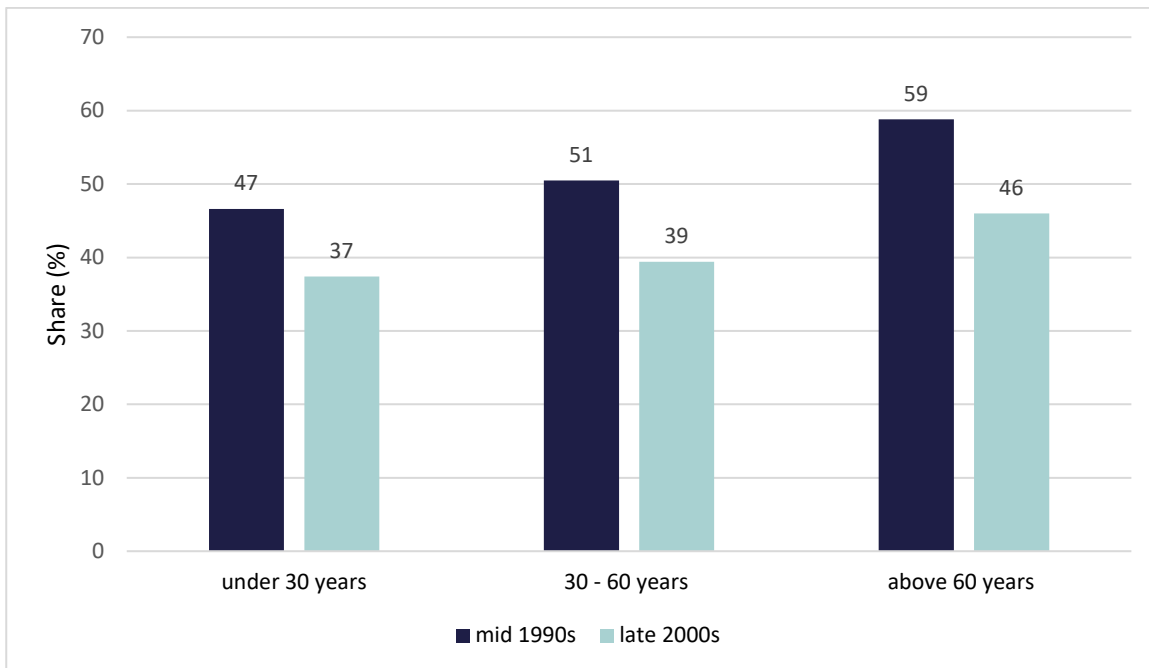
Figure 4 – Share of the population who agree that men make better leaders than women in 32 countries, mid 1990s and late 2000s (%)



Source: World Values Surveys, Waves 3 and 6.

Note: To compute the average, each country is assigned an equal weight.

Figure 5 – Share of the population who agree that men make better leaders than women in 32 countries by age cohort, mid 1990s and late 2000s (%)



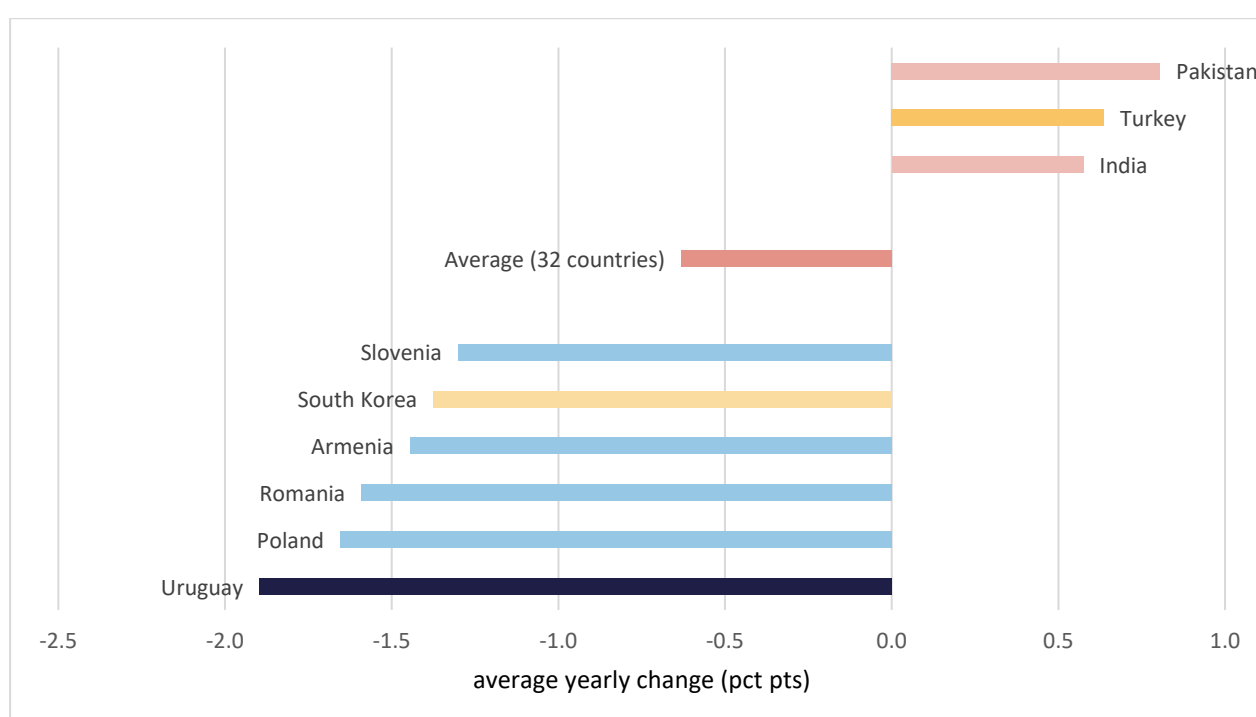
Source: World Values Surveys, Waves 3 and 6

Note: To compute the average, each country is assigned an equal weight.

Attitudes towards women in politics are changing significantly in some cases, notably in many countries in Europe and Central Asia and in Latin America and the Caribbean. While the average change between the two periods was an improvement of .6 percentage points yearly, this annual change was more than twice as high in six countries (Figure 6).

At one extreme, in Uruguay, 38% of the population favoured male political leaders in the mid-1990s, while just 9% did so in the late 2000s. However, in three countries, Pakistan, India and Turkey, there was a notable hardening of attitudes. In Pakistan, 62% of the population in the mid-1990s believed men made better leaders, a figure that had climbed to 74% by the late 2000s. This shows that both the pace and direction of change can differ significantly, confirming that the story of attitude change about women in politics at a global level since Beijing has been both mixed and complex.

Figure 6 – Average annual change in the share of the population who agree that men make better leaders than women in selected countries, mid 1990s and late 2000s (percentage points)



Source: World Values Survey, Waves 3 and 6.

Note: The average is the average annual percentage point change across the 32 countries included in both waves 3 and 6 of the WVS.

Dark blue indicates countries in LAC, pale blue is ECA, orange is MENA, light orange is EAP, light pink is South Asia.

The norms factor

Gender norms are key factors in the tension between positive changes in descriptive representation and persistent sexist attitudes. Gender norms are the gendered rules which determine attitudes and behaviours that shape social dynamics and determine that – in most cases – the political space is seen as masculine. We know that these norms can be deeply embedded in institutions and individuals within societies and hard to change.

This guide explores the latest knowledge on where and how norm change fits with changes in the political space – and our knowledge gaps in this area. It outlines routes for understanding norm change (Figure 7), and discusses a number of these areas in detail, along with their intersections.

Understanding the intersecting nature of change is critical, because we know that shifting norms means working across both the formal and informal domains ([Waylen, 2013](#)).

Gender norm change also requires working across sectors, given their constant intersection with varied domains. Norms about women's sexuality and mobility, for example, can put women on an unequal footing in the public space, where they are viewed differently from men. Norms that affect women's health, education and financial wellbeing can, in turn, influence their ability to devote time and resources to political activity and leadership. Gendered beliefs about an (often) masculine political space can affect gendered expectations about people's clothing, speech and family life – expectations that can, in turn, lead to unequal voting behaviour, unequal treatment and perceptions of leaders based on their gender, and even stigmatisation and violence.

Changes in gender norms are part of the expansion of women's political voice that is occurring alongside wider changes in society. Of course, political, social and economic contexts, party structures and regime types differ markedly, and any global comparison can be difficult. Certain trends, however, suggest broadly shared pathways and barriers to inclusion. Trends visible in the cross-national data on attitudes and descriptive representation explored in this Guide could be complemented by deeper case-study analysis to further explore and understand context.

The expansion of women's political representation in the late 20th and early 21st century provides a mixed lesson for those interested in the transformation of harmful gender norms. As [Kenny and Patel](#) identified in their analysis of World Values Survey data, there is a correlation between gender norms and the proportion of legislators who are women in different countries where more equitable norms (measured by the share of people who reject the notion that men make better leaders than women) are correlated with a higher percentage of women in parliaments. However, they also show a 'surprisingly low connection' between attitudes towards women as leaders and indicators of other aspects of gender inequality ([Kenny and Patel, 2017](#), p. 9).

Recent research by the International Women's Development Agency (IWDA) in [Cambodia, Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands](#) has found that, while there is 'widespread support for the general idea that women and men should have equal rights', including the right to political leadership, the same respondents may hold the conflicting view that men are better suited to political leadership than women. This illustrates a complex normative space: shifting one norm might not shift another, and while people can support gender equality in principle, they may still perpetuate sexist attitudes and beliefs about specific issues related to gender in politics.

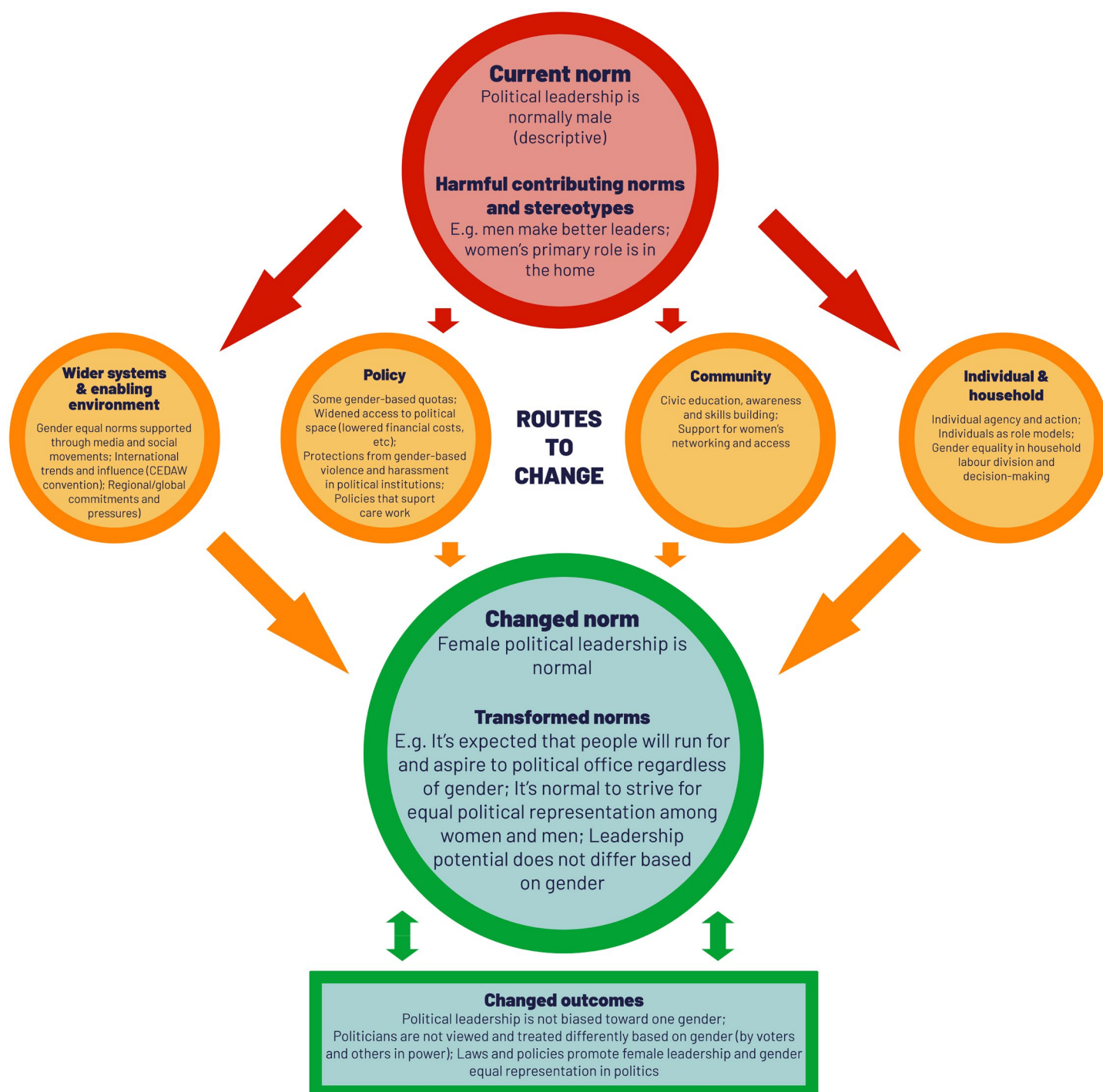
While more women are entering politics and female political leadership is becoming increasingly normalised (according to a range of indications of change explored in this Guide), it is still not clear how far these changes have been supported by changes to the social norms that affect gender equality outcomes in general or those specific to women's political inclusion. As [Milazzo and Goldstein \(2017\)](#) have noted, changes in other areas are inter-connected to norm change, such as advances in women's health, economic empowerment and education and, in turn, their contribution to wider social changes that can enable women's participation in public life.

Political voice and empowerment has many shapes, and the measurement of women's representation and voice can explore diverse areas of political life. So many activities can constitute political voice: from everyday engagement with political issues in schools, communities and homes, around the dinner table or online, to active participation in protests, petitions or political gatherings, voting, and running for or taking up leadership roles in political office.

Changes across socio-institutional levels (systems and structural, policy, community, individual and household, can all play their part (see Figure 7). Women's growing role in all of these political areas has been enabled by changing norms and, as more women have become leaders, this has contributed to

further norm change. Their resulting increased voice and their contribution to more gender-equitable laws and policies, and their greater visibility in leadership, provide role models and normalises their power and influence. This, in turn, heightens women's aspirations and enhances respect for women's political voice.

Figure 7 – Factors in – and routes to – norm change



Norm change can both prompt and reflect outcome level changes in women's representation. In many of the cases explored in this Guide, while gender norms are largely invisible and difficult to isolate, addressing them is critical for longer-term sustainable change in outcomes.

Some progress has happened at speed, sometimes propped up by the implementation of gender quotas that mandate different forms of proportional guarantees for women's representation or by significant political upheaval (such as conflict, regime change and democratic transitions, including many in the late 20th and early 21st centuries¹). Some gains have been achieved gradually and have been supported by wider gender equality gains in society over time. But whether speedy or gradual, most changes have been achieved through the combination of the courageous action of individuals, the support of the collective might of women's groups and social movements and, sometimes, legal changes such as quotas and interventions such as civic education and skills development programs.

Quotas and other legislative guarantees are a popular area of exploration and have, to some degree, supported an increase in women's representation. Their use is growing, but their impact on norms has been mixed. In terms of type of quota, for example, voluntary political party quotas seem to be present in countries where relatively low shares of the population hold sexist attitudes (see discussion on quotas in this Guide). Programmes and initiatives that aim to empower and educate women may also play a role, though evidence is limited on their impact, best practices, and strategies for mainstreaming and scaling their work.

2. What has led to change?

Our analysis of drivers of change begins with a review of the evidence on norm change relating to women running for and standing in leadership positions, assessing the available evidence on how norms around women's leadership potential have changed in certain contexts, as well as the barriers to change. After this broad view, we explore the issue of gender quotas and their potential impact on changing norms more specifically. Finally, we explore women's wider engagement in informal politics (i.e. in social and political movements) and learning on norm change.

Shifting attitudes towards women leaders

Gendered attitudes towards women leaders (elected and appointed roles)²: Evidence of norm change?

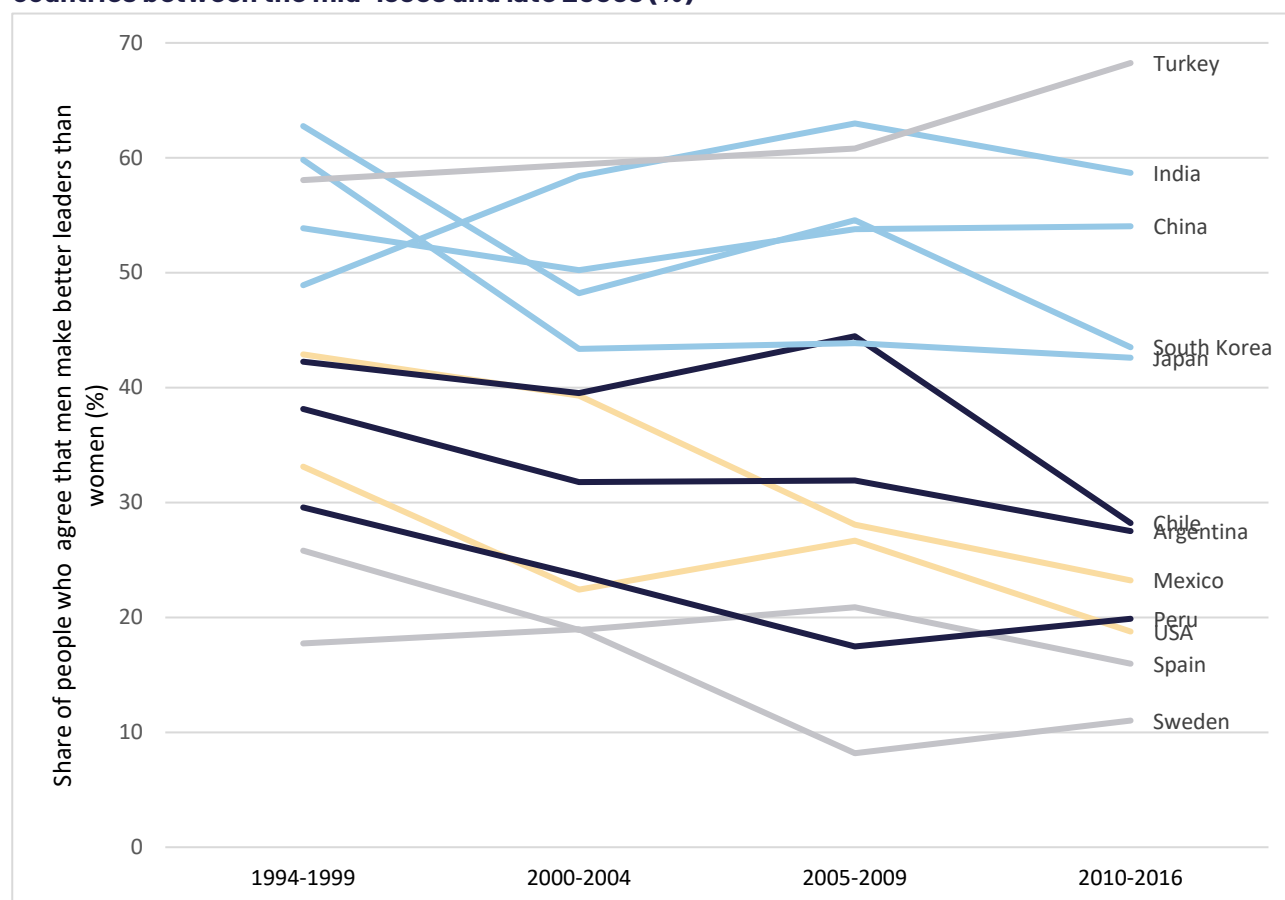
Gendered attitudes and behaviours have shaped women's experiences in running for and standing as political leaders, including as heads of state, political ministers and advisors, members of parliament and local leaders. These underpin norms that shape and reflect the way in which women experience opportunities and barriers when running for elected roles or accessing appointed roles. They also influence the ability of women to access resources, skills, education and training, and the formal and informal social networks and connections that are needed to finance and sustain political roles.

¹ Waylen (2007), for example finds that democratic transitions can lead to varied outcomes in terms of women's descriptive and substantive representation, as well as gender relations, sometimes supporting a range of positive gender outcomes. Studies on political transitions in Africa, such as Tripp, 2015, have also found that post-conflict African countries had significantly higher rates of women's political representation than those that have not undergone conflict.

² This distinguishes between those leaders who are brought to power through electoral processes and those who are appointed to roles (such as ministerial roles) or through (non-voting) paths to power in non-democratic regimes. The distinction is relevant in the sense that the 'route' to leadership differs – one through popular voting, the other through elite selection – although some questions explored here about attitudes towards these leaders vs. their male counterparts once in leadership may be similar regardless of the path to power.

Norms can perpetuate the view that a woman's role in the family is different from that of a man – such as seeing women as having more responsibility for caregiving, or seeing power as part of traditionally 'masculine' traits of strength and authority. As a result, the public may see female candidates as less qualified, less able to lead (because of their perceived caregiving or reproductive capacities, for example), and as less likeable as candidates for not conforming to feminine norms or for failing to replicate masculine leadership traits. They may also see them, very simply, as less likely to win – meaning that people who might support them in principle do not actually vote for them for fear of 'throwing away' their vote. For those women who are elected, norms also shape their experience of leadership, including how they are perceived and treated by the public and by fellow political actors.

Figure 8 – Share of the population who agree that men make better leaders than women in selected countries between the mid-1990s and late 2000s (%)

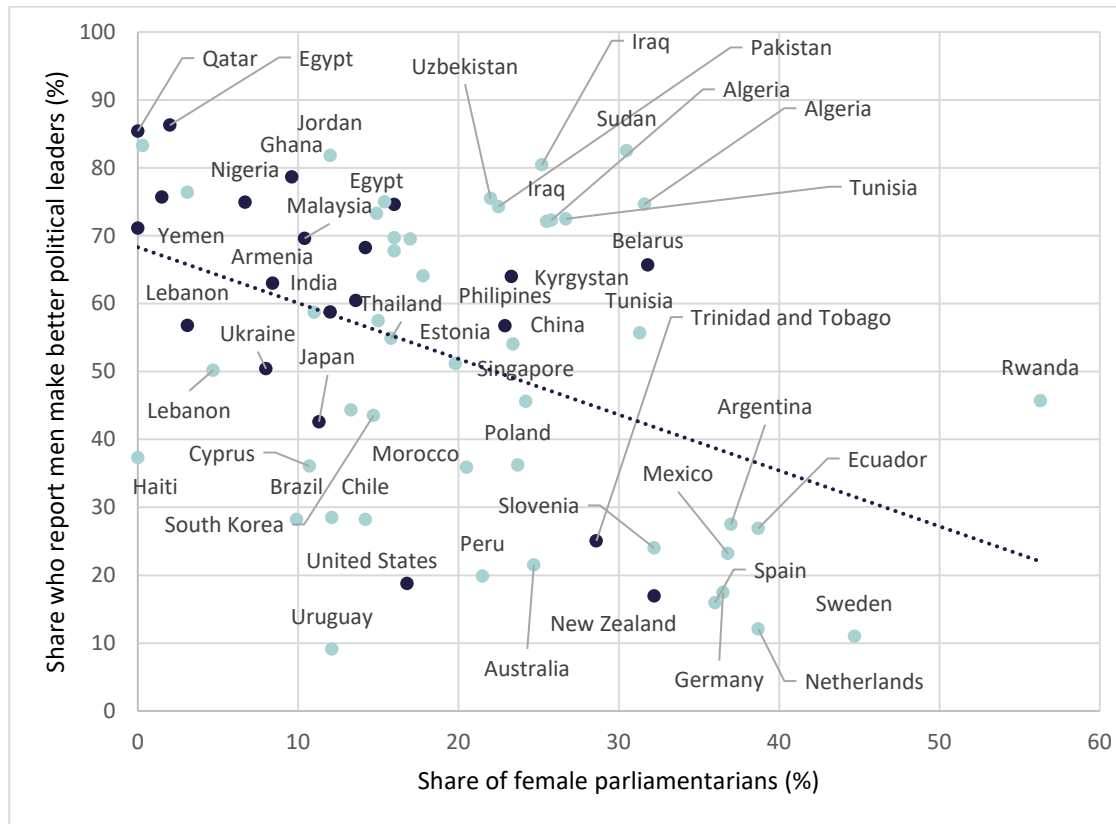


Source: World Value Survey (WVS), waves 3 through 6.

Note: The countries included here are the only ones that have consistent data for all 4 WVS waves.

Attitudinal data from 12 countries for which data are available from all four waves of the World Values Survey indicate that norm change does not tend to be linear: the pace of change differs over time and reversals are evident in some cases (Figure 8). In some cases, as in Chile, changes have been rapid – between 2006 and 2012 alone (a period featuring Michele Bachelet's first term as President), the share of the population agreeing that men made better leaders fell by 16 percentage points, from 44.5% to 28%. In others, as in Peru, changes have been more gradual – the share of the population agreeing that men made better leaders fell by a total of 10 percentage points over the 25-year period and remained virtually unchanged over the last two waves of the survey.

Figure 9 – Share of the population who agree that men make better political leaders than women and share of female representation in parliament in 67 countries, late 2000s (%)



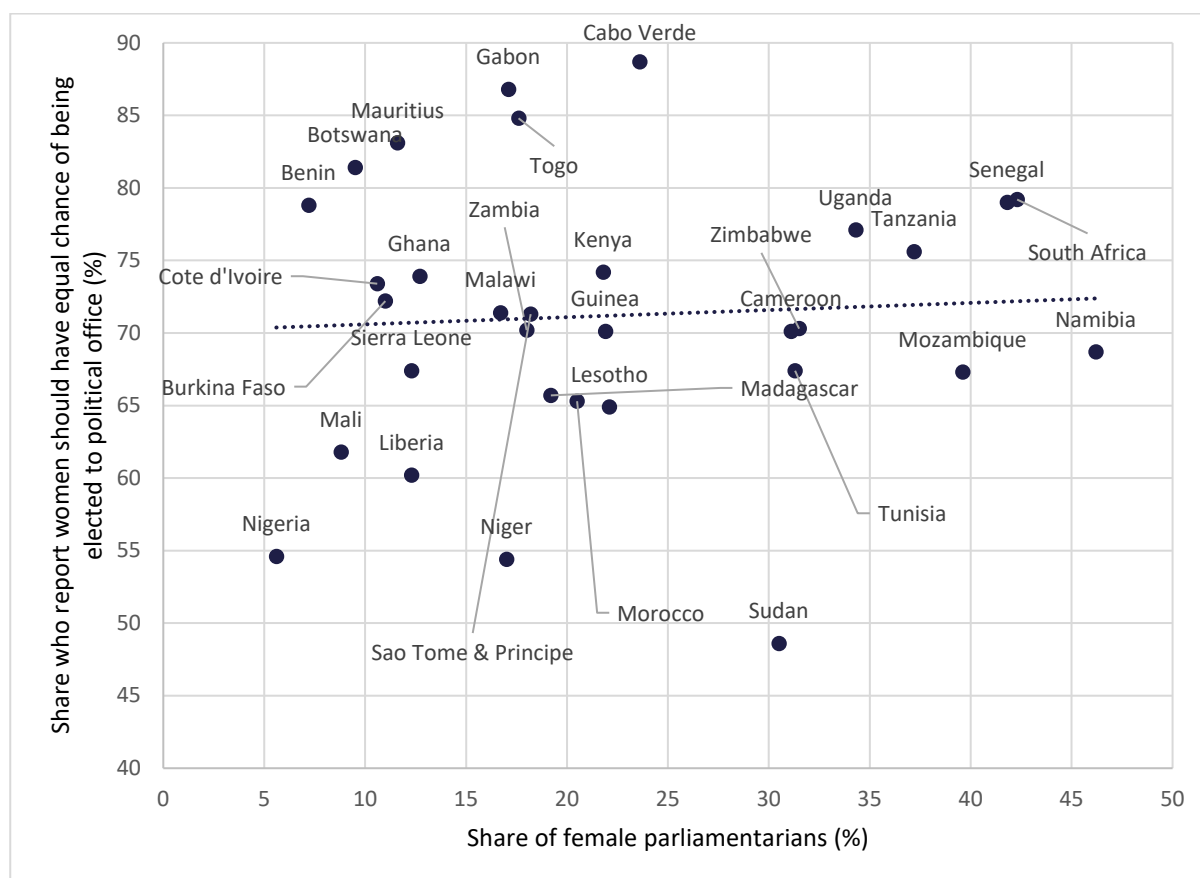
Notes: Countries indicated by dark blue dots did not have any quota in place at the time of the WVS Wave 6 survey (see footnote 4).

Source: Data on attitudes is from World Values Survey, Wave 6 and Arab Barometer survey (Wave 5). Data on female representation is from IPU in World Bank (2020), matched to the year of the attitudinal data.

Across 67 countries, in countries where attitudes are more progressive, there tends to be higher female parliamentary representation – but there is considerable variation around this trend ($r_s = -.398$, $p < .001$). In Rwanda, the country with the highest share of female parliamentarians (56% in 2011), some 45% of the population still reported that men made better political leaders, whereas in Haiti, which had 0 female parliamentarians in 2016, a lower proportion (37%) of the population reported this viewpoint. In Sudan and in New Zealand, about 30% of parliamentarians were female in the late 2000s – but while 82.5% of the population in Sudan believed men make better leaders, only 17% did so in New Zealand. Finally, the populations of both Uruguay and the Netherlands report progressive views (with around 10% reporting that men make better leaders than women), yet female representation in Uruguay stood at only around 12%, compared to nearly 40% in the Netherlands.

Data from Afrobarometer and Arab barometer point to the lack of a relationship between attitudes towards women as leaders and actual female parliamentary representation. Across 32 African countries, the correlation between attitudes and parliamentary representation is slight and not statistically significant ($r_s = .044$, $p = .811$) (Figure 10).

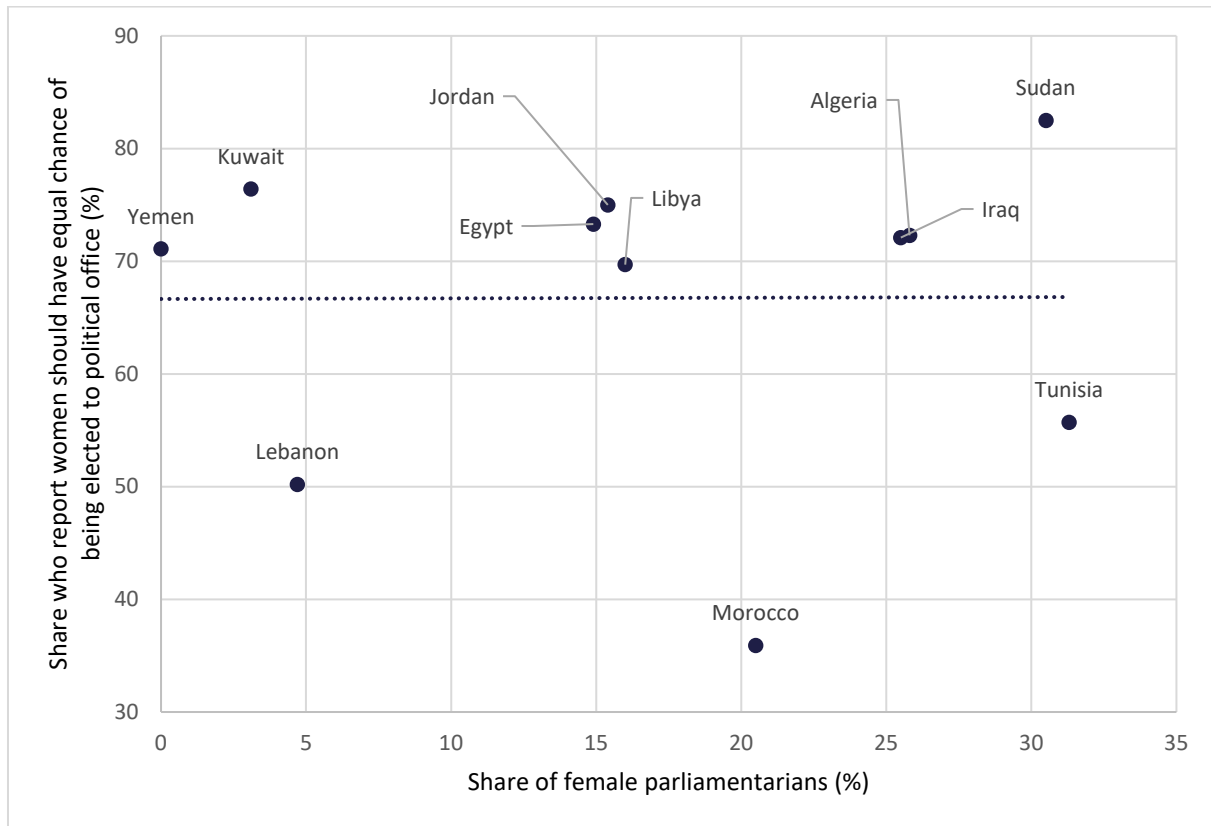
Figure 10 – Share of population who agree women should have the same chance of being elected as men and proportion of female parliamentarians in 32 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, late 2000s (%)



Source: Afrobarometer Round 7 (2016–2018) on attitudes and IPU data for 2018 from World Bank (2020) on parliamentary representation.

Similarly, narrowing in on the Arab region (Figure 11): there is little or no relationship between the share of people who believe women make better leaders than men and the share of seats women occupy in parliament. Levels of distrust of female leadership are widespread: in all but 1 country, more than half of people reported that men 'are better at political leadership than women'. However, the share of seats in parliament occupied by women ranged widely in 2018, from none (in Yemen, where a quota adopted in 2014 was suspended as a result of the conflict) to 31% (in Tunisia). And while the shares of people holding regressive attitudes in Algeria and Yemen are roughly the same (72% and 71% respectively), the share of women parliamentarians differs substantially (standing at 26% and 0% respectively).

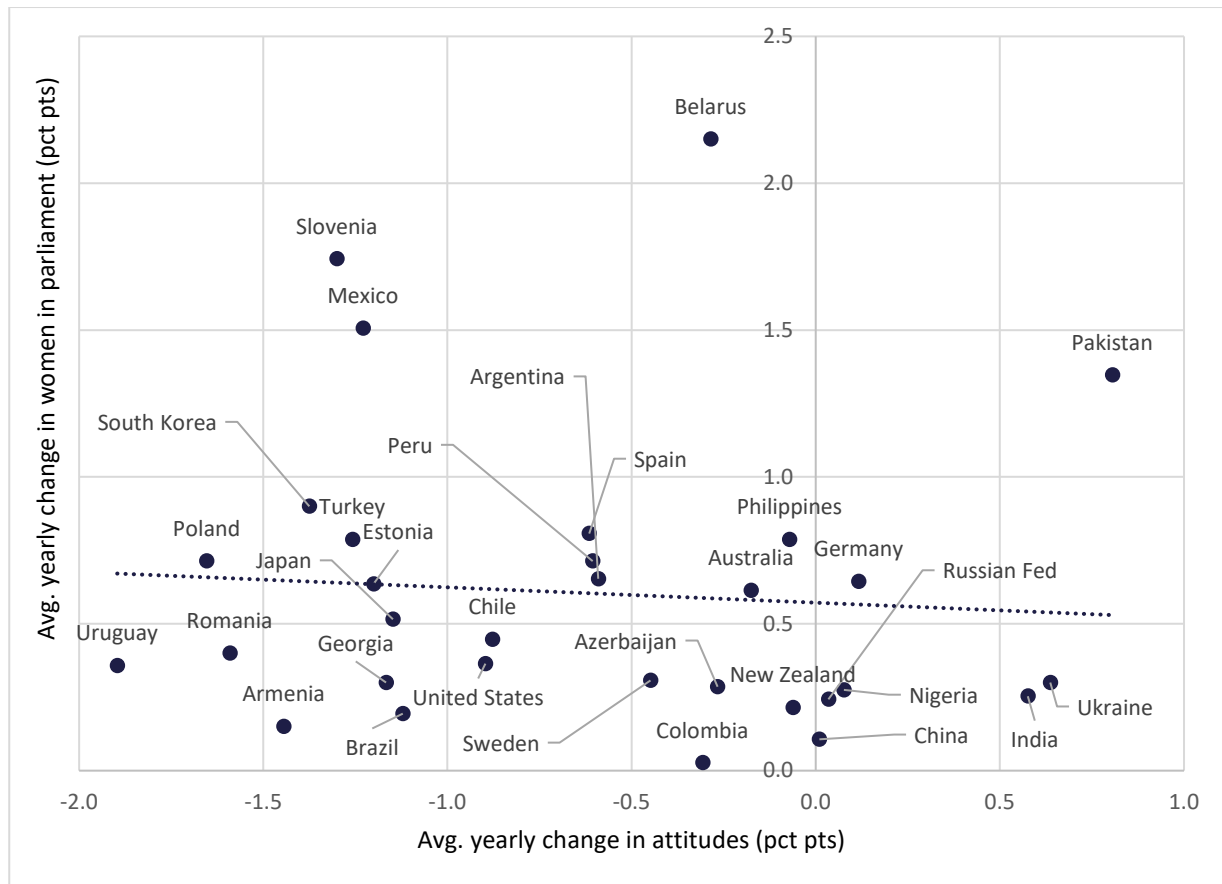
Figure 11 – Share of population who agree that men make better leaders than women and share of female parliamentarians in the Arab region, 2018 (%)



Source: Arab Barometer Wave 5 (2018) and IPU data for 2018 from World Bank (2020) on parliamentary representation.

Having looked at the extent to which levels are correlated, we now look at change over time in two ways. First, we explore how yearly change in attitudes is linked with yearly change in parliamentary representation for 31 countries, drawing on data from the third and sixth waves of the World Values Survey, and data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) for the closest corresponding period. Second, we examine how these changes appear in two country contexts: Mexico and South Korea.

Figure 12 – Average yearly changes in the share of the population agreeing that men make better leaders than women and the share of female parliamentarians, mid-1990s to late 2000s (percentage points)

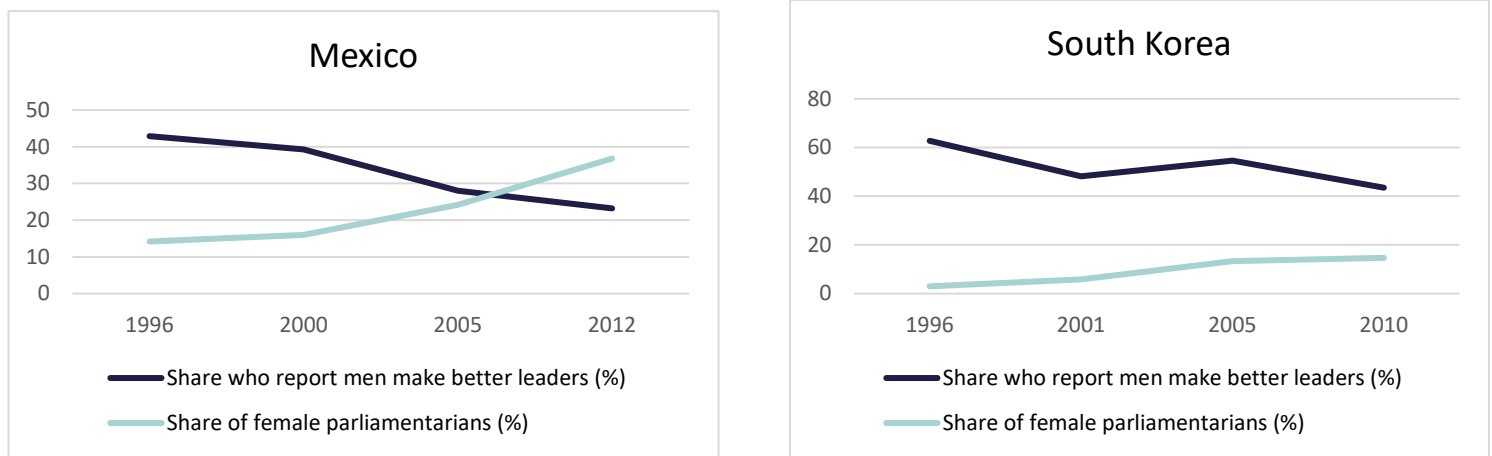


Source: World Values Survey data on attitudes for Waves 3 and 6. IPU data from World Bank (2020) on female parliamentary representation for the closest period corresponding to the years included in Waves 3 and Waves 6 of the WVS data for each country.

Across countries, there is virtually no correlation between average yearly *change* in attitudes and average yearly *change* in parliamentary seats between the mid-1990s and the late 2000s. There are also some striking comparisons that point to very diverse patterns. In Belarus and Colombia, for example, there was some improvement in attitudes (averaging -.3 percentage points yearly in both countries). However, while female parliamentary representation increased 2.15 points yearly in Belarus, it grew by only .03 points yearly in Colombia. And while attitudes improved markedly in Armenia (-1.44 points yearly), they hardened in India, (.58 points yearly). Nonetheless the increase in parliamentary representation was greater in India (.25 points yearly) than in Armenia (.15 points yearly).

National context matters and within countries, attitudes and levels of representation tend to move in tandem over time, as the examples of Mexico and South Korea confirm (Figure 13). In other words, focusing on relationships between countries over a relatively short period of time is likely to obscure broader historical trajectories.

Figure 13 – Share of the population agreeing that men make better leaders than women and share of female parliamentarians in Mexico and South Korea, mid-1990s to late 2000s



Source: World Values Surveys waves 3 through 6 (attitudes), and corresponding IPU data from World Bank (2020) on female parliamentary representation.

What explains some shifts in attitudes towards women leaders, but limited gains and some persistent sexism, as well as the differences in parliamentary representation in cases where attitudes are similar? The steady global increase in elected and appointed female politicians suggests that norms based on opposition to female leadership are starting to crack (though sometimes class plays a role, where elite women are able to gain representation but not the wider population). However, there is also evidence that women are simply bursting through in some cases, thanks to sheer grit in the face of embedded harmful norms that still pose a real barrier to female candidates.

For example, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) reported [an increase in violence against women in politics in 2018](#) (although measures to track globally comparable changes in rates of violence over time are limited) despite – or perhaps in reaction to – global rises in the number of female MPs that year. In Europe, 85% of female MPs interviewed by IPU said that they had experienced some form of gender-based violence (see discussion on violence in ‘sticky issues’ section).

Box 1. Attitudes towards women in leadership in the G7 (Reykjavik Index)

Sexist attitudes about women in leadership persist, even in the G7, a group of countries with some of the highest rates of female political representation. The [Reykjavik Index for Leadership](#) has found that women are more likely than men to view women and men as equally suitable for leadership (across business and politics). In the UK, with the most gender equal attitudes of the G7 bloc, 78% of women think men and women are equally suited to lead, compared to 75% of men. Even so, 42% of people in the UK – a country led at the time by Prime Minister Theresa May – still perceived male leadership as preferable. In Angela Merkel’s Germany, male respondents are the most likely among those interviewed across the G7 to perpetuate gender stereotypes, but female respondents express more gender equal attitudes. Overall, however, only one in four people in Germany feel ‘very comfortable’ with a woman as head of government.

Some have suggested that women tend to be held to higher standards of behaviour and personal integrity than men in politics, and are more likely to be sexualised and expected to comply with unequal sexual purity norms than men. While we lack specific evidence and measures of this phenomenon, as noted by [Bauer in 2016](#), women who emphasise more masculine traits tend to have their leadership potential evaluated more positively. At the same time, however, these women can face a 'likeability backlash', indicating that adapting to stereotypical leadership norms may be a double-edged sword for female candidates. Studies on business also reveal a perceived 'glass cliff', with women leaders more likely to be removed than male ones in times of trouble. There is also evidence from the UK that women are punished more for corruption than men ([Waylen, 2019](#)).

These leadership norms can become distinct barriers at certain moments and can also combine to affect women candidates in different ways throughout the stages of a political career. For example, research in the Solomon Islands in 2016 by [Dicker et al.](#) found that voters prefer male candidates for a variety of reasons, while female candidates were criticised – in a way that men were not – for their personal behaviour and judged by their circumstances (such as being married, rather than single, divorced or re-married). Concerns that female candidates could not win an election also left some voters feeling that, even if they supported a female candidate, their votes would be wasted if they voted for her.

Gender stereotypes are both a cause and an effect of the barriers women face in running for office and the lack of female role models. The World Bank ([World Bank, 2015](#)) surveyed 84 countries to understand the hurdles women face in launching and sustaining successful political careers, revealing a number of factors that hold women back: many of them informed by norms but also manifest in wider social challenges and constraints.

Family roles, for example, present a barrier to many women, and some female politicians have adapted by starting their careers later, having fewer children, and organising shorter commuting times to spend more time with their families than their male counterparts. Women also tend to have weaker networks of political support than men, sometimes related to barriers of class and fewer educational networks, and receive fewer private donations. The media can also be seen as a roadblock, appearing to violate women's privacy and focus more on superficial criticisms than on the policy positions and professional accomplishments of female candidates.

Country level research has found that these roadblocks are visible across contexts and are shaped by norms, to some degree. Research from [Sierra Leone by Trócaire in 2018](#), the [Solomon Islands by Wood in 2015](#), and [Saudi Arabia by Alahmadi in 2011](#), has found that gender norms have proved to be a significant barrier for women candidates for political leadership positions. They also found, however, that the nature and relative influence of gender norms compared with other barriers differed across contexts.

In Sierra Leone, for example, Trócaire identified social and gender [norms](#) as a main obstacle to female candidates in the 2018 election. Norms about women's primary roles in the home contributed to the harassment, intimidation and discrimination experienced by female candidates who deviated from norms by spending significant time in the public sphere and in work outside the home. This combined with a second barrier for female candidates related to the 'monetisation of politics', where candidates needed to buy votes, pay fees as candidates and access gatekeepers. While 18 women were elected as MPs in the 2018 election (12% of MPs) and a few were elected as mayors, district council chairs and local counsellors, all of the women interviewed complained about lacking the resources to run, as well as challenges related to norm-based barriers to mobility and access, and norms governing gendered views of their home and care responsibilities.

Wider constraints (social, financial)

Al-Maaitah et al. (2012) found that [women in Jordan face major obstacles to leadership](#) based on norms around:

- their multiple obligations to their families in addition to their work responsibilities
- their perceived inability to balance work and family responsibilities and lack of time management skills
- lack of family and tribal support and the frustration of women's aspirations by dominant male family members, which makes women shy away from important decisions about their personal life
- increased violence against women who do not conform to social norms
- lack of confidence and trust from society in women as politicians and leaders and the overt bias of tribes towards male candidates
- social stigma that says that working women are careless about their families and household responsibilities
- guilty feelings among women for leaving to work away from their family responsibilities.

Financial constraints are often reported as barriers to women running in politics. In Saudi Arabia, [a survey of over 160 women leaders by Alahmadi in 2011](#) found that women must contend with norm-based factors combined with a lack of resources as well as cultural and personal challenges, such as negotiating family expectations. Negotiating gender norms was not reported as a primary barrier in surveys: rather, women perceived their lack of access to resources as a major constraint to gaining political positions, although the need to align their participation in politics to cultural language and values, such as those that align to Islamic culture, was noted as an important contextual factor.

Similarly, [Wood's 2015 research from the Solomon Islands](#), which examined women's poor performance as political candidates (2% of female candidates were successful over the period 1980-2010, compared with 14% of male candidates who were successful over this period) finds that normative constraints around expectations of women in society lead to their comparative disadvantage, as well as challenges in their access to both finance and to the male gatekeepers they need to gain access to constituents. Norms about whether or not women should be leaders are also informed by perceptions that women candidates cannot run successfully.

All of these examples suggest that gender norms, including the specific norms that uphold economic inequality and those that affect women's ability to mobilise campaign finance, are significant barriers to their access to political power in a range of contexts. They also suggest that gender norms work in combination with practical constraints such as time use, family responsibilities and other structural barriers.

Box 2. Women ministers: Reflecting gender norms?

Beyond parliamentarians and elected leaders, women's political representation and voice are becoming increasingly normalized in ministerial positions, although their share of such roles remains fairly small. A study from [Annesley, Beckwith and Franceschet](#) found that a 'concrete floor' is needed in ministerial positions – a minimum number of women in a cabinet to ensure its legitimacy.

In 2014, women held 17% of ministerial positions, up from 15% in 2000. However, women tend to take up 'feminised' ministerial roles in, for example, departments of education, culture or women, and to be responsible for social sectors. Of the 1,096 ministerial posts held by women in 2014, 187 were related to social affairs and family services compared to 45 in foreign affairs and 24 in budget/finance ([UN Women, 2015](#)). [The 2020 Map of Women in Politics](#) by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the UN shows that the top five portfolios held by women ministers globally are:

1. Family/children/youth/elderly/disabled
2. Social affairs
3. Environment/natural resources/energy
4. Employment/labour/vocational training
5. Women's affairs/gender equality

In 2019 – and for the first time since 2015 – only nine countries had no women at all in their top cabinet ministerial posts: Brunei Darussalam, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Viet Nam.

Related questions about gender norms can improve our understanding of not only how they influence the number of female ministers, but also how, specifically, they shape the sectors and roles in which they dominate. The intersection of gender norms, norm change, and the areas in which women ministers hold posts would be an interesting area for further research.

Leadership as norm change: the impact of role-modelling on girls' aspirations

One barrier to women's participation is gender differences in aspirations. For the US, [Fox and Lawless](#) (2011) found that, despite comparable credentials and experience, accomplished women are less likely than men to perceive themselves as qualified to run for office. Gender norms in society, as well as women's historical exclusion from politics, help to maintain a 'masculinized ethos' in electoral politics. 'Traditional gender role socialization and gender norms' continue to create an environment where women do not see themselves as potential political candidates.

Research by [Desposato and Norrander \(2009\)](#) in Latin America found that the presence of women in a country's elected leadership increases women's political involvement overall, and may help to shift gender norms around the suitability of women to hold positions of power. However, more recent studies, including [Reyes-Housholder and Thomas \(2018\)](#) found that the increase in the number of woman presidents in Latin America had a mixed effect on women's descriptive, substantive, and symbolic representation, with no real trend. There is some evidence that increasing women's representation in politics can enhance women's aspirations and attitudes about roles for themselves and other women.

Examining public opinion data from 50 countries, [Jalalzai and Alexander \(2014\)](#) found that an increase in the percentage of women in parliaments contributes to a greater belief among populations in women's ability to govern. In India, [Beaman et al. \(2012\)](#) found that the presence of women leaders has a positive influence on the career aspirations of adolescent girls (including their aspirations for careers in politics) and educational attainment. This supports earlier research on Western democracies by [Campbell and Wolbrecht \(2006\)](#), [Fox and Lawless \(2005\)](#) and [Wolbrecht and Campbell \(2007\)](#), which found that the existence of women parliamentarians increases the political participation of women significantly. Recent research by [Ladam et al. \(2018\)](#), using data from 1978–2012, also illustrates the major positive effects, arguing that women political leaders serve as role models for other women interested in political careers, thereby increasing the number of women candidates.

In another study based on OECD data from 28 Western countries, [Wolbrecht and Campbell \(2007\)](#) and [Campbell and Wolbrecht \(2006\)](#) find that both women and girls are more likely to engage in political discussions with friends and family when women comprise a greater percentage of the legislature. And, in a study of 31 democracies worldwide, [Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler \(2005\)](#) also confirm that the increased legislative representation of women enhances women's confidence in the legislative process, as well as feelings of policy responsiveness.

Using data from the World Values Surveys, [Liu and Banaszak \(2017\)](#) found that the proportion of women ministers (in cabinets) has some effect on women's political participation (voting and party membership, petition signing, etc.), which suggests some kind of role-modelling effect through the greater visibility of women in politics. They also found that the impact differs, depending on the form of political engagement, and does not have a strong effect on women's parliamentary representation or their participation in strikes or boycotts. [Iyer et al. \(2011\)](#) show that having a woman leader caused women to report more crimes against them in the Panchayati Raj, India. They used data from the Millennial Survey to show that women living in a village led by a woman are slightly more likely to approach the police, suggesting that they feel more confident that their voices will be heard.

Nevertheless, some evidence suggests the effects of role models may not be very strong in certain contexts, and sometimes difficult to isolate. In East and Southeast Asia, for example, [Liu \(2018\)](#) finds no role-model effect of female leaders in the region, and that the existence of women political leaders generates a backlash against women's political engagement, where female leaders are still perceived as unequal and tokenistic. Our analysis of WVS and IPU data also suggests that a possible role-model effect is complex, and not overwhelmingly visible in attitudinal change.

Political gender quotas and norm change

Gender quotas that aim to guarantee the greater representation of women in political affairs have become an increasingly popular tool to jump-start and ensure more gender-equal representation in governments. In 1990, the UN Economic and Social Council set a target of 30% women representation in decision-making bodies by 1995 in response to global women's rights movements calling for such quotas. The 1995 UN Beijing Conference on Women went further, providing an impetus for quota policies by calling on governments to 'ensure equal representation of women at all decision-making levels in national and international institutions.' This is also a target in SDG 5.5, which aims to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.

Given this global environment, political quotas have emerged as a viable and popular policy option in countries across the world. Quotas have helped to drive the expansion of women's parliamentary

membership, which has doubled since 1995, as described above. Over 70 countries have implemented legally mandated parliamentary gender quotas, and 60 political parties in more than 30 additional countries have also put quota measures in place voluntarily to increase women's inclusion.

Studies on the effects of quotas are mixed, however, and many criticisms remain (that they are tokenistic, ineffective, or could even have perverse consequences). A classic study found in Latin America that quotas are a 'relatively painless way to pay lip service to women's rights without suffering the consequences' ([Htun and Jones, 2002](#), 15), maintaining that they need to be well-designed and enforced if they are to make a difference. Evidence on the impact of quotas on attitudes is particularly limited.

The theory of gender quotas is that an imposed increase in women's representation will help to break the discrimination that holds women back – creating a descriptive norm whereby women are represented and their leadership becomes normal. In general, across countries, increases in women's representation correlate with decreased gender discriminatory attitudes, as measured by the World Values Survey (see Figure 9).

There are, however, significant outliers. Belarus, for example, has a higher percentage of women in parliament (32% in 2011) than the average, yet most respondents (around 66%) agreed that men make better leaders. Uruguay has a relatively low proportion of parliamentary seats held by women (12% in 2011), while only 9% of respondents reported that men make better leaders. This suggests that while gender quotas to increase the proportion of seats held by women in parliaments and can lead to wider changes including helping to shift harmful and discriminatory attitudes about women's ability to lead, they do not guarantee this change, and harmful norms can still persist or worsen despite increases in experiences of female leadership. In addition, time lags may make norm change, if it occurs, hard to measure.³

Data analysis indicates that quotas alone do not have a significant impact on changing attitudes, although there is some correlation depending on quota type, particularly between progressive attitudes toward women leaders and voluntary political party quotas.

There are three main types of parliamentary quota, as follows.

- *Voluntary party quotas*: A party commits itself to nominating a certain percentage of women candidates for electoral lists.
- *Legislated quotas*: Candidate quotas are required by the law of a country and stipulate that a certain number of candidate positions must be reserved for women. These quotas sometimes include conditions on the position of women on the electoral list by, for example, requiring that every second entry on the list must be a woman.
- *Reserved seats*: Positions for which only women candidates can compete – used as a more direct way to regulate the number of women in elected positions.

Evidence from South America and sub-Saharan Africa has found that some systems are better than others, where women are more likely to be elected in proportional representation systems with closed party lists ([Marcus et al., 2016](#), [Baldez, 2004](#); [Ballington and Matland, 2004](#)). Studies have also

³ Evidence suggests that quotas can encourage a range of other political outcomes which may have wider gender-related impacts, such as their use by small tribes to gain political status by taking advantage of a reserved seat system (for example, in Jordan). See Bush and Gao (2017) 'Small Tribes, Big Gains: The Strategic Uses of Gender Quotas in the Middle East', *Comparative Politics*.

identified that other factors (such as levels of democracy or of economic development) can be linked to increases in female representation, but that the presence of quotas matters the most, and that they are the fastest route to greater female representation. It is important to note that quotas are, at times, imposed by external actors, such as international actors in post-conflict situations, and that they can also increase the representation of conservative women ([Bush, 2011](#), [Tadros, 2010](#)).

Sub-Saharan Africa has seen an increase in gender quotas prompted by a number of factors. These include quotas as a product of the opportunities created by political transition, agitation by women's organisations, and the force of international and regional pressures to push for more gender-equal governments, as noted by [Barnes and Burchard \(2012\)](#). Public opinion surveys (Afro Barometer), however, suggest that the increased parliamentary representation of women is not associated with more gender equal attitudes about leadership (Figure 10).

Overall, World Values Survey data suggest that quotas may shift harmful norms, but this is not clear cut. Countries with more progressive attitudes may not see the need for quotas.

In countries with voluntary gender quotas, our analysis shows that attitudes toward women in leadership appear to be more progressive, on average, than in countries with mandatory quotas or no quota at all. However, legislated quotas do not show this same association.

Box 3. Intersectionality, quotas and norms

More evidence is needed on intersectional issues such as race, class, ethnicity and disability, and how they interact with the effects of gender quotas on representation. A 2013 study by [Celis and Erzeel](#) on Belgian and Dutch quotas for women and ethnic minorities found that multiple demands for representation can lead to competition among minority groups. In Belgium, for example, competition has resulted in a primary focus on gender above ethnic diversity in electoral politics. In the Netherlands, some strategies to link gender and ethnic diversity through quotas have worked, but support for minority female representation has been more successful than that for minority men.

Evidence that gender quotas in parliaments may help to shift norms is limited, but our data analysis shows that voluntary political party quotas and progressive attitudes are correlated. While introducing quotas for intersectional factors alongside gender quotas may contribute to wider social norm change for a more open, representative political space, far more evidence is needed to confirm this.

A 2011 [study](#) by Natraj found that having minority reserved candidates reduced turnout and increased the share of votes for right-wing parties. When combining reservations for women and other groups, affirmative action is seen to improve the position of minority groups on the whole, but conflicts between them can arise and intra-group inequalities could be emphasised. The production of categories is political, and can 'create competition between groups, reinforce or embed difference in society, or create a false impression of unity', as noted by [Marcus et al. 2016](#). On the whole, evidence on combined minority quotas and gender quotas is fairly limited, and more is needed.

See also Guariso et al., '[When Ethnicity Beats Gender: Quotas and Political Representation in Rwanda and Burundi](#)'.

This suggests that environments that are conducive to the internalisation of gender equality principles by parties through voluntary quotas, for moral or instrumental reasons, can both reflect and promote more gender equal attitudes. In this sense, quotas are a blunt tool that may help. They risk provoking backlash or may have minimal impact, but where they do help they are usually supported by a wider enabling environment. They may be most effective through voluntary party measures (reflecting political values internalised or promoted through the party system) than through more top-down mandated quotas across a system (reserved seat quotas).

Some literature, including a global review of the impact of institutional reforms on gender norms and economic and political participation by [Milazzo and Goldstein](#), suggests that gender quotas in local village councils have 'changed perceptions about the ability of women to be effective leaders, increased the probability that women compete and win elected positions, and improved parents' aspirations for their daughters and their educational attainment'. Research from [Besley et al., 2017](#) found that gender quotas in political parties in Sweden raised the competence of male politicians, eliminating some underqualified male candidates. At the same time, the impact of quotas on the overall wellbeing of women is debated, as quotas can be seen to empower the elite and those from wealthier backgrounds, but not women as a whole, as noted by the Chronic Poverty Advisory Network ([CPAN, 2016](#)).

Data on the presence of a quota, attitudes towards women and the share of female parliamentarians point to the many complexities. Of the 56 countries with all three data points, 21 (37.5%) had no quota, 16 (26%) had a legislated quota, 12 (21%) had a voluntary party quota and the remaining 7 (12.5%) had both legislated and voluntary party quotas in place.⁴

On the one hand, countries that have some type of quota tend to have higher levels of female representation than those without – the share of female parliamentarians in countries without any quota was significantly below those with any type of legislated and/or voluntary quota in place (Figure 14). On the other hand, there are countries within each of these categories that have relatively high and low levels of female participation (Figure 15). In some countries, quotas are not respected or enforced; perhaps the most striking example is [in Haiti](#) where despite a legislative quota calling for at least 30% female participation, there were no female parliamentarians in 2016. In Yemen, a quota was adopted in 2014, but suspended as a result of the conflict and never enacted. Countries are classified as having a voluntary quota if any of its political parties has a quota in place, even if their reach is limited, and in some countries, such as Argentina, the stipulated representation of women varies by province.

⁴ These quotas were in place the year the wave 6 WVS survey took place in each country. Since then there have been some changes that are not reflected in the data shown:

Chile's constitutional reform in 2015 included the adoption of a gender quota, while political party quotas have been in place (albeit weakly enforced) since 1996.

Kazakhstan passed a quota law in May 2020 so although it has a quota now, this is not included in the data presented.

Malaysia adopted voluntary gender quotas in 2017.

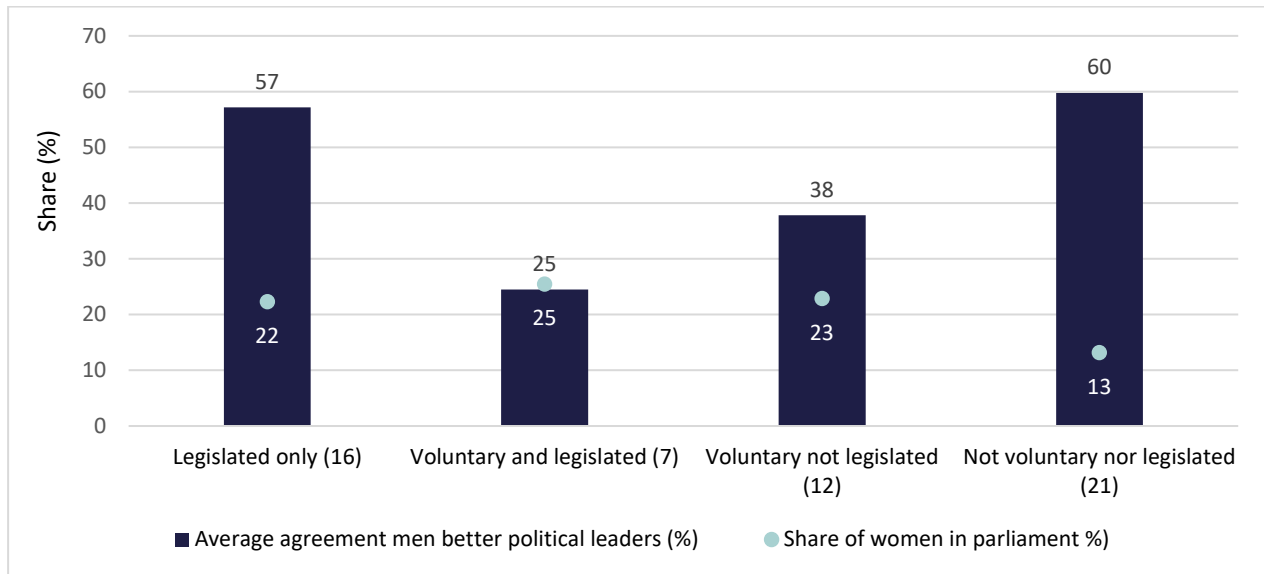
In New Zealand, voluntary party quotas were adopted by the Labour Party (2013) and Green Party (2015).

[Uruguay](#) passed a gender quota bill in 2009 to ensure a minimum of 33% of women in the two chambers that make up the country's general assembly. Opposition slowed the passage of the bill, which took more than three years to go through. When it did, it contained a compromise: although the quota would be permanently applied to parties' internal elections, it would be enforced only in the following general and local elections.

Yemen adopted a gender quota in 2014 (after wave 6 of WVS in any case). This was later suspended as a result of the conflict and has never been enacted.

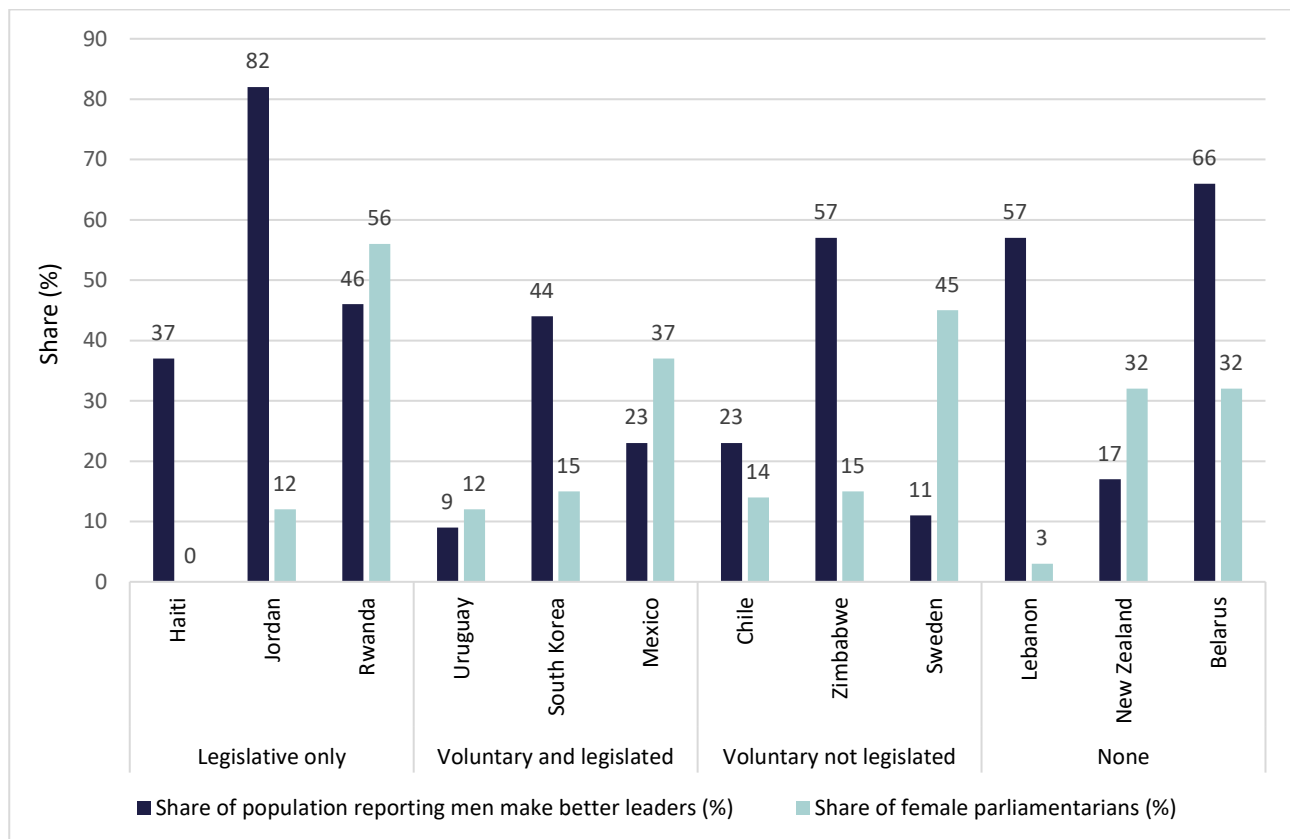
Zimbabwe, adopted a legislated quota in its 2013 constitution.

Figure 14 – Share of the population agreeing that men make better political leaders and share of female parliamentarians in 56 countries by quota type, late 2000s (%)



Source: WVS wave 6 (attitudes), IPU data from World Bank 2020 on female parliamentary representation, IDEA gender quota database supplemented by academic papers and media for countries not in the quota database (and to identify when quotas were adopted, where this information is not in the database).

Figure 15 – Share of the population agreeing that men make better political leaders and share of female parliamentarians in selected countries by quota type, late 2000s (%)



Source: WVS wave 6 (attitudes), IPU data from World Bank 2020 on female parliamentary representation, IDEA gender quota database supplemented by academic papers and media for countries not in the quota database (and to identify when quotas were adopted, where this information is not in the database).

A substantial body of literature on gender quotas focuses on whether greater representation of women in legislative bodies leads to improved policies for women and increased government spending on women's issues. For example, [Clayton and Zetterberg \(2018\)](#) find that the introduction of quotas (which they term 'quota shocks') is followed by increased spending on public health, which is offset by relative decreases in military spending and other spending categories.

Gender quota theory suggests that increasing women's representation in decision-making will support policy and legislative decisions that match women's policy priorities more closely, including those around public health, though work in this area requires greater intersectional analysis to account for varied or intersecting identities. In their study on India, [Chattopadhyay and Duflo \(2004\)](#) found that men and women differ in their policy preferences. For example, petitions for investments in drinking water in West Bengal account for 31% of requests made by women compared to only 17% of the requests made by men (and 54% vs. 43% in Rajasthan), suggesting that women's health interests may be better served by increased female political representation. In Norway, [Bratton and Ray \(2002\)](#) found that women's representation in municipal councils has been linked to greater childcare coverage, which has improved women's ability to participate in the workplace.

Gender diversity in governments has also been associated with decreased corruption: an analysis of more than 125 countries by the economists [Jha and Sarangi \(2018\)](#) found that corruption levels are lower in countries with a higher percentage of female legislators. There is also opposing evidence, however, with [Devlin and Elgie \(2008\)](#) finding that there has been little effect on policy outputs in Rwanda, where political representation of women is the highest, and where quotas had led to women's issues being raised more easily and more often than before.

Evidence from India suggests a positive impact of gender quotas on attitudes towards women in politics, particularly at the local level. In their survey of elected women village leaders in West Bengal, [Beaman et al. \(2009\)](#) find that reserved quota-induced exposure to women leaders reduces implicit gender discrimination among men respondents. This was demonstrated through explicit and implicit bias testing, which showed that men in never-reserved villages (that had no exposure to women leader) associate women sub-consciously with the domestic sphere, while exposure to a women leader reduces such attitudes about women in politics. They conclude that while exposure to a women leader does not alter villagers' preference for male leaders, gender quotas weaken attitudes about gender roles in the public and private spheres and eliminate negative bias in perceptions about the effectiveness of women leaders among male villagers.

Later research from [Beaman et al. \(2010\)](#) also shows, through the use of the random assignment of reservation, that the likelihood of a woman speaking in a village meeting in India increases by 25% when the local political leadership position is reserved for a woman. This suggests that gender quotas help to challenge gender norms and expectations that women should remain unheard in community and political matters.

Research by [Bhavnani \(2009\)](#) found that even after a requirement to field a woman via quotas in parliamentary seats in India has lapsed, constituencies are still more likely to be represented by a woman. However, quotas may be less effective in changing attitudes in different contexts and at different levels of government.

Studies in multiple world regions on quotas reveal a vast diversity of views and findings on the potential for quotas to support norm change. [Franceschet and Piscopo \(2008\), for example,](#) find that while quotas have increased women's descriptive representation in Argentina, they also can reinforce negative attitudes about women's capacities as politicians. While the quotas have given women legislators a mandate to change policy, they have also invoked traditional gender norms about women's sociocultural roles. They have led to a perception that 'quota women' needed special

treatment, and are undeserving or underqualified, as also noted at the global level by [Tripp and Kang in 2007](#). Franceschet and Piscopo also found that political parties in Argentina tended to implement gender quotas by nominating the wives and relatives of male party leaders, gendering existing nepotism.

In a broader cross-country study, [Zetterberg \(2013\)](#) also finds no proof of the impact of gender quotas on changing gendered attitudes and behaviour in Latin America. But [Beaman et al. \(2009\)](#) compared electoral outcomes in unreserved constituencies in Panchayats in West Bengal to twice-reserved (but not once-reserved) constituencies and found that the number of women candidates elected more than doubled (from 4.8% in never-reserved areas to 10.1% in twice-reserved areas). This suggests that there is a delayed impact after having a women leader twice, indicating that discrimination and attitudes towards women leaders take time to shift and follow demonstration effects.

There is also concern that broad gender quotas may crowd out other marginalised ethnic or socioeconomic groups (see Box 3 on intersectionality). They do not address the ways in which different identities intersect with gender and act as barriers to their political engagement and leadership.

Box 4. Rwanda – gender quotas as a success story for norm change? A mixed picture

Rwanda has the world's largest proportion of women in the lower house of its Parliament (61% in 2019). But the wider impact of having more women in its parliament, supported by quotas, has been debated. A study of the effect of parliamentary gender quotas in Rwanda by [Burnet \(2011\)](#) found that increased representation of women in parliament through quotas has not led to greater protection for women's rights or strengthened democracy, and that it has not resulted in a shift in norms towards those that are more gender equal. Negative consequences have included friction with male siblings, male withdrawal from politics and increased marital discord.

The quotas in Rwanda have, however, had some benefits, as also noted by Burnet (2011) and by [Bauer and Burnet, \(2013\)](#) in terms of increased respect for women from families and communities, women's enhanced ability to speak and be heard in public fora, and their greater autonomy in decision-making, as well as increased access to education. Women MPs, in particular, are serving as role models and inspiring other women to become more engaged in politics. For example, Balete paramount chief Kgosi Mosadi Seboko, the first woman paramount chief in the country, reported that her people and other 'tribal leaders' did not see a problem with her becoming chief in the early 2000s because women were already serving as Members of Parliament and one woman was even the minister of local government, to whom chiefs report (Bauer and Burnet, 2013).

There has been increased engagement by women in Rwanda's local governance structures, even where there were no formal quotas, suggesting that the increase in women MPs has contributed to a shift in norms. Burnet also found a dramatic growth in the willingness of women to speak in public settings since 2003, and that increased representation of women in governance had led to greater access to education and new career opportunities, as well as joint decision-making power over domestic resources. Those interviewed said that having more women in parliament has helped women 'find respect' and encouraged men to realise the 'dignity of women'.

When comparing Rwanda with other cases, evidence suggests that a combination of factors are important in evaluating the potential of gender quotas for success. Bauer and Burnet (2013), for example, look at women's representation in Botswana, where gender quota campaigns have raised awareness but have not succeeded in achieving quotas, and where women's parliamentary representation is low and continues to fall. They compare this with Rwanda, where a constitutional gender quota, including reserved seats combined with voluntary party quotas for women, has generated the world's first majority female lower house of parliament.

The authors argue that such cases suggest that a democratic state is not necessarily more likely to adopt gender quotas or have more women in parliament than a less democratic one, and that other factors are more important in determining both. Even in systems dominated by single parties with limited democracy, like Rwanda, elected women are able to represent women's interests to some extent. And campaigns to adopt quotas, even when unsuccessful (as in democratic Botswana), can contribute to substantive and symbolic representation effects, even if these translate into only limited descriptive representation. Through the comparative case-study approach, the authors argue that most of the significant changes to women's representation happen outside national legislatures.

Social and political movements and norm change

Changes in attitudes to women's political interest and activity

Women's engagement in politics (including in social movements) is underpinned by increased equality in the interest in politics displayed by both men and women. When women and men believe they can have an impact through politics and an equal role to play, they are more likely to engage in movements that call for change. World Values Surveys indicate that overall interest in politics is increasing in as many countries as it is decreasing, with striking rises in Pakistan and Sweden, and waning interest in China and Armenia, among other countries.

When viewed with a gender lens, there has been no overall rise in women's interest in politics, despite their increasing representation. Women appear to be less interested and engaged in politics than men overall: on average, across 33 countries, just over 35% of women reported that 'politics is important in life' in the mid-1990s and the late 2000s, compared with nearly 45% of men (World Values Surveys, waves 3 and 6). Yet some studies suggest that the presence of women as candidates and elected officials (sometimes prompted by gender quotas), can contribute to greater political engagement among women, shaping the normative environment on attitudes to women's roles and what they should care about. For example, a cross-national [2008 study of 35 countries by Karp and Banducci](#), drawing on data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), found that increases in female representation are correlated with improved attitudes about the political process, and that this effect is apparent among both men and women.

There is evidence that the gendered gap in political engagement diminishes as women's representation in formal political roles increases. Using Afrobarometer data across four waves (1998–2008), [Barnes and Burchard \(2012\)](#) found that the presence of women in elite positions correlates positively with the increased political engagement of individual women (measured as increases in women talking about politics, having an interest in politics, contacting a party official, or attending a political demonstration).

Engagement in politics comprises a range of actions from everyday citizens (non-elected or appointed) and can take different shapes in different political environments. It can include engaging in community discussions on political issues, commenting and posting online, leading and signing petitions, voting, lobbying and advocacy, and supporting protests, demonstrations, sit-ins, social movements or other activities.

Women's commitment to and engagement in politics, reflected for example in their participation in social movements, is also reflected in changes to gendered voting patterns. Before the height of the women's suffrage movement, gender norms mandated even political engagement through the act of voting as a masculine space. The acceptance of women's voting as normal behaviour indicated a significant shift in assumptions and attitudes towards women's political engagement: women were no longer seen as simply an extension of male opinions, but as people holding their own opinions, with the freedom to exercise them in their own right.

Training, education and awareness raising, combined with supporting women's access and financial autonomy, have been important levers in unlocking changes in perceptions of women's ability to vote (and participate more widely in politics) as 'normal' and even as a civic duty and requirement. These changes underpin wider shifts in assumptions, from viewing women as apolitical agents to empowering them to perceive themselves and be perceived by others as having an equal say in political activity.

In their study of China's Fujian and Liaoning provinces, [Pang et al. \(2013\)](#) found that women's level of knowledge about voting rights is linked to their increased exercise of these rights, but that gender norms can prompt backlash and negative responses to women's engagement, despite increasing civic education. Other women and village leaders (men) affect how women see their ability to vote, which is shaped by gender norms. Even after women participated in civic education and training, barriers to voting included pressure from husbands to vote on behalf of their wives, or husband's confiscating their wives' ballot papers and filling them in, as well as pressure from male relatives to vote a certain way or to change their vote (e.g. one woman's father-in-law changed her vote to the candidate he preferred) based on traditional gender norms that do not support the participation of women in the public affairs of their communities.

In Mali, [Gottlieb \(2016\)](#) found that civic education courses providing information about voting rights were risky for female participants who viewed women's political participation as deviating from gender norms, that they self-imposed limits to their other civic participation and that they faced male backlash for their participation in the course. The impact of civic training is, therefore two-sided: women benefit from improved skills and knowledge, but gender norms can lead to unintended consequences such as harassment and negative comments from male community members. This indicates that civic education can have a limited impact and risks inflicting harm unless it is accompanied by wider social change including changes in gender norms.

Evidence indicates that women participate actively in politics on a global scale, but that their participation can differ to that of men. Women find it easier to participate in ways that can be incorporated into daily life and that do not put a strain on already limited resources. Technology and online engagement can enable their political participation, but can also generate backlash. However, their participation in protests and demonstrations, although still challenging, has helped to push back against the gender norms that limit their visibility and political engagement, and has generated important women's initiatives. Evidence of gender norm change in this area remains limited, as it can be hard to measure and trace change, but images of women protesting in the streets, for example, suggest that attitudes about women's place in politics are adapting as their leadership in political spaces continues to expand.

Online activism has been identified as a space that could capture women's political voice (but also risks negative impacts, which are discussed in the following section). A study in New Zealand by [Schuster \(2013\)](#) found that young women use social media to raise awareness about political issues and dialogue with others through Facebook pages and blogs, leaving comments, sharing ideas and posting critiques. This suggests that norms shape how women feel they can engage, and that online spaces create opportunities for a more equal voice. The women interviewed emphasised that the internet operates as a safe space where they can speak out and discuss their opinions on political issues.

Gender can also affect online behaviour. In her US study, [Bode \(2017\)](#) found that women and men participate in fairly similar ways in social networking and politics, but that women are more likely to engage in political behaviour that is less visible and less likely to offend. While men are more likely to post on social media in general, women are more likely to unfriend people for political reasons. Female study participants described online fora as powerful spaces for political conversations, especially about sensitive topics such as sexual abuse. They said, for example, that they felt much safer behind a keyboard. Another advantage of social media was that it offers flexible engagement in politics that worked alongside their busy schedules, which involve negotiating childcare and other responsibilities. Participants also reported that social media enhanced their ability to network at regional, national, and international levels, although there are negative aspects, as will be discussed later.

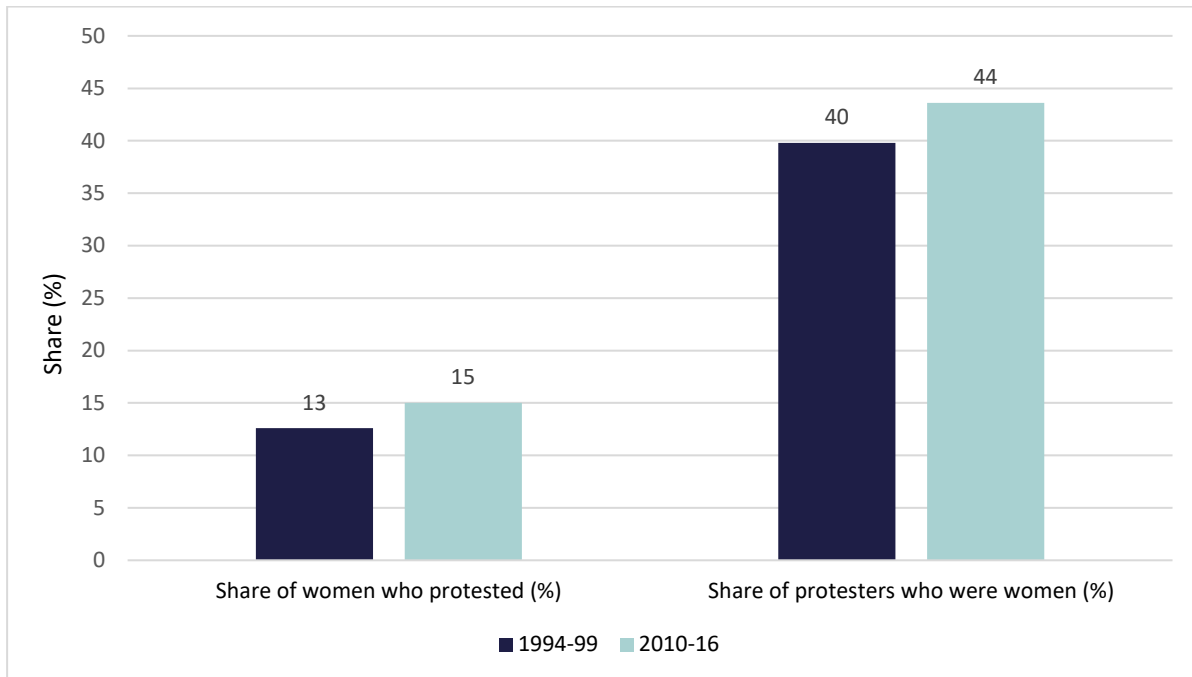
[Research](#) by AlSalem in Kuwait found that Kuwaiti women used various social media platforms to participate in political movements and share information, and that social media was an essential part of the 2012 *Karamat Watan* (Nation's Dignity) movement. Social media allowed women to participate in the movement because it was deemed unacceptable for them to physically occupy spaces (e.g. sleeping in the squares, etc. like the men), and platforms like Twitter and Instagram allowed them to evade the social pressures of family, culture and tradition. However, these benefits come with risks, as online space can also open women up to violence (see our discussion on 'sticky issues').

Women's participation in social and political movements

Participation in protests has decreased slightly since the Beijing conference in 1995, although 2019 was called the 'year of the protest', given the number of high-profile demonstrations that took place. The gender dynamics of social movements, as reflected in physical protests, suggest some growth in women's roles in the protests that are still taking place.

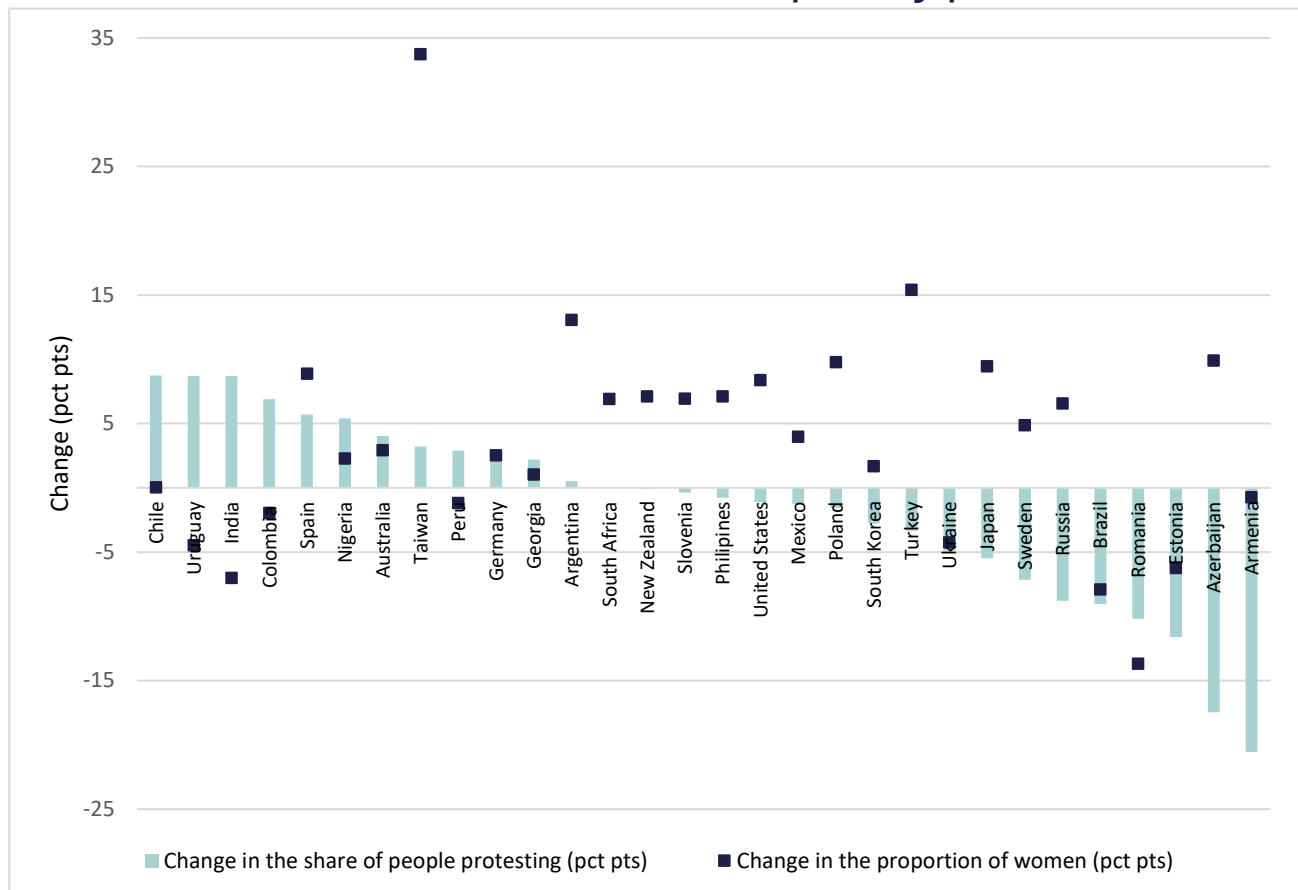
On average, across 30 countries, the share of people who protested was 16% in the mid-1990s and 14.5% in the late 2000s. At the same time, however, the share of women who protested rose slightly (from 12% to 15%), as did the share of protesters who were female (from 40% to 44%) (Figure 16). In the mid-1990s, Sweden had the highest share of female participation in protests, at 51% of protesters, while the lowest share was 16% for Taiwan. In the late 2000s, Sweden still had the highest share at 56%, while the lowest share was 31% (Romania) (Figure 17). Women's participation in protest activity has expanded notably in some countries. At one extreme, the proportion of women participating rose by 34 percentage points in Taiwan (from 16% to 50%) and by 15 points in Turkey (from 26% to 41%). The proportion of female protesters has declined by more than five points in just four countries: Romania, Brazil, India and Estonia. This is clearly an interesting area for further research.

Figure 16 – Share of women who protested and the share of protesters who were female in 30 countries, mid 1990s and late 2000s (%)



Source: World Values Survey, waves 3 and 6.

Figure 17 – Changes in the share of the population who protested and in the share of protesters who were female in 30 countries, mid-1990s and late 2000s (percentage points)



Source: Author calculations of data from World Values Survey, waves 3 and 6.

These changes suggest that complex factors can contribute to the gender dynamics of social movements, but also that women's participation in them is increasing. Their engagement in political and social movements can help to shape people's attitudes and perceptions around women's political agency and their roles in society more widely. However, gender norms have also excluded women from protests or certain functions within them, and have presented barriers to the formal processes of transition that can follow.

Specific movements to address women's issues and women-led movements have also been a key and growing feature of contemporary social organisation. Social movements led by women have been pivotal in demanding, making, and sustaining mass-based demand for an end to gendered injustice in all domains of social, economic, political and cultural life. [Molyneux \(2001\)](#) distinguishes between three types of women's movements: autonomous women's movements; those that have 'associational linkages' with other organisations (potentially with different interests); and 'directed mobilisations', where women's collective action is directed by interests outside their group (e.g. women's wings within political parties). While women's rights and gender justice are 'on the agenda' in many areas, activists still encounter strong resistance to changing gender politics and practices.

Feminist movements can be an important indicator of the presence of policies to combat violence against women ([Htun and Weldon, 2012](#)). Indications also suggest that women's representation in a number of thematic areas is increasing. For example, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) conflict and crisis mapping by [Kishi et al. \(2019\)](#) found that demonstrations with significant women's representation are on the rise in nearly every region reviewed. The first quarter of 2019 featured record or near-record high levels of demonstrations featuring women. These included demonstrations consisting mostly or entirely of women (e.g. a gathering of mothers of prisoners), a women's group (e.g. Women of Zimbabwe Arise [WOZA], the Free Women's Movement [TJA] in Turkey, or the All India Democratic Women's Association [AIDWA]), or demonstrations focused specifically on women's rights (e.g. women's reproductive rights, or policies around women's clothing).

It is important to note, however, that social movements are not inherently progressive. A Bridge report developed by [Horn \(2013\)](#) over a three-year period through a collaborative approach with 150 social movement activists, practitioners, scholars and supporters from around the world, considers the enabling factors and barriers encountered by women in social movements and how best to integrate women's rights issues into social movement agendas. It highlights the many challenges that face women who engage in social movements, which arise from the gendered attitudes, behaviours and stereotypes that are ingrained within the 'deep structure' of some of these movements. Many women are expected to play caring roles within movements, provide emotional support, or take on back-office administrative roles.

Evidence from Ukraine's (2013-2014) Maidan protests gathered by [Phillips \(2014\)](#) found that while women and men participated in nearly equal numbers (41-47% of protestors were reported to be women), women were excluded from more dangerous activities, such as the permanent occupation of Maidan square – where 88% of the occupants were men. When the protests became violent, men turned women away from the barricades 'for their own protection', although women themselves continued to work in dangerous roles as doctors and nurses, couriers for emergency supplies, advocates and lawyers. There was a backlash against women's political and civic visibility in Ukraine after the protests, and particularly against journalists.

Drawing on the experiences of activists themselves, the impact of sexual harassment and violence against women engaged in social movements by their fellow members is also identified – with young women facing the most challenges. At the same time, women have been prominent in driving movements on violence, the environment, worker's rights, democratic change and a host of other issues. Young women have been at the forefront of the climate movement, and women were reported to make up 70% of protesters at times in the street protests that led to the fall of the Al-Bashir regime in Sudan in late 2019. Questions remain as to how gendered norms are challenged in certain movements and reinforced in others, and how gender equality actors can enhance the transformative potential of social movements for their wider potential to empower and amplify women's voices.

Across seven advanced democratic economies (Australia, Canada, Finland, Japan, Norway, Sweden, and the United States), [Dodson \(2015\)](#) found that women and men had similar levels of protest activity across the 1994-2004 World Values Surveys waves,, although there were gender differences in the way in which they engaged. Women are more likely than men to engage in non-confrontational activities, while men are more likely to be involved with forms of activism that are confrontational. In more gender-egalitarian contexts, however, women are more likely than men to participate in a wide array of protest activities. Evidence of gendered activism reinforces the argument that gender shapes protest politics in ways that undermine political equality.

Female protesters in Ukraine who participated in the 'Night of Women's Solidarity' demonstrations and the *Zhinocha Sotnia* (Women's Squad), an all-woman self-defence brigade, challenged gender norms and stereotypes in extremely visible and visceral ways. Their participation in the protests and, more importantly, their push-back against being sidelined by gender norms, generated important women's initiatives (including self-defence classes), opened up conversations about women in Ukraine's past and future, and introduced women's rights principles to segments of the population previously reluctant to embrace equality. The highly visible efforts of Ukraine's women in the Maidan protests inspired more women to seek leadership roles in local and national government, and other spheres of power, despite the 're-traditionalised' climate that followed the protests.

A review of social movements across Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India by [Basu \(2005\)](#) explores South Asia's extensive experience of female leaders (including Sirimavo Bandranaike, Chandrika Kumaratunga, Khaleda Zia, Sheikh Hasina, Indira Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto), the growth of its ethnic and religious political parties (such as Jama'at-e-Islam in Pakistan and Bangladesh, the JVP and Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, and the BJP, TDP and DMK in India) and the ways in which women have been mobilised around elections and often positioned as figureheads and spokespersons for their parties. It points out that this has not, in general, offered them lasting institutional power or rights, or even any increased autonomy from their families.

In some post-colonial contexts, social movements and political parties have been deeply connected to their roots in nationalist movements. Women were often active for the first time in politics during the independence struggles of the 20th century, but their relationships to nationalism, nationalist movements and campaigns differ significantly across countries and regions, and evidence suggests that these relationships are highly context-specific, as the examples in Box 5 illustrate.

Box 5. Women's participation in campaignsNi Una Menos Campaign (Latin America)

This campaign against gender-based violence began in Argentina, describing itself as a 'collective scream against machista violence'. The campaign was started by a range of Argentine actors – artists, journalists and academics – and spread to support a large network of partners across Latin America, utilizing the online space and the hashtag #NiUnaMenos (not one less) and other off-shoot hashtags (such as VivasNosQueremos or #Wewantusalive). Using the online space to mobilise, the group also organised mass demonstrations, such as a mass protest at the Argentine National Congress after the murder of a 14 year-old girl by her partner, as well as other large protests in Chile and Uruguay.

Musawah Movement (global)

The Musawah Movement (Campaign for Justice in Muslim Family Laws) was launched in February 2009 at a meeting in Kuala Lumpur that brought together Muslim gender-equality advocates from a range of contexts. The movement draws on Islamic teachings, principles of universal human rights, national constitutional rights commitments and the 'lived realities of women and men'. Engaging with religious principles and basing its work on the principles of Islam, the movement brings gender equality advocates together to work on knowledge and capacity building, advocacy and campaigns that call for reforms to family laws in varied global contexts.

Women's prominence in political protests (Lebanon, Sudan)

Women were prominent in protests calling for political change in Lebanon in 2019 and the image of protester Malak Alawye Herz kicking a minister's armed guard has now become a meme. The kick symbolised both the struggle against patriarchy and against the Lebanese political system. Seen as corrupt, the system has been accused of increasing the socio-economic inequalities that affect women most severely. Women also came to the fore in protests in Sudan that led to the overthrow of the al-Bashir regime in 2019. Women, both young and old, accounted for up to 70% of the protesters in Sudan (symbolised in the images of a young female student Alaa Salah, the 'woman in white') despite being targeted with intimidation, harassment and even rape. Women have since been vocal in efforts to enhance women's rights, reform gender laws and justice in the new regime.

Overall, the increases in women's mobilisation seen in recent key movements, and their identified links to changing policies (such as those in the area of violence, which has been best evidenced) suggest that women are changing policy and the norms that view them as apolitical actors, and engaging visibly in politics through citizen movements and collective action. More work is needed to understand the impact of social movements on attitudes and behaviours towards women in politics and civic life, and on gender norm change more widely.

3. Problems and sticky issues

Having discussed challenges and strategies for change, several specific, cross-cutting barriers emerge as what we call particularly ‘sticky issues’ that merit further research, programming and legal work. These include the issue of gendered violence against women in politics (both online and in person), as well as the sexualisation of female candidates, and gendered coverage in the media, all of which are discussed in this section.

Violence against women in politics

As the number of women seeking political office has grown, so too has the backlash against them. Gendered political violence has been identified as covering a range of issues facing politicians that can have varied motives as well as effects on those subjected to violence (see [Bardall et al, 2019](#)). Politically motivated attacks on women have been on the rise in nearly every region of the world, reaching a record high in 2019, according to [Kishi et al. \(2019\)](#). Violence against women in politics is most visible in attacks against female candidates, but can also include attacks against women who vote, intimidation to deter women from political activity in the first place, and myriad forms of harassment. In Kenya’s 2017 parliamentary election, for example, a [record number](#) of women ran for office, thanks in part to a rule requiring that no more than two-thirds of the seats in a governing body could be controlled by one gender. During the campaign, however, many female candidates faced targeted forms of violence, including threats of public stripping and demands that they quit politics.

The killing of female candidates remains a global concern, including the assassination of [Marielle Franco](#)—a black, gay, feminist city councilor in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil – murdered by militia members opposed to her political positions, and of [Juana Quispe](#), a councilor in Bolivia who had come under fire for assisting female colleagues in filing harassment complaints.

Harassment based on harmful norms can damage women personally, prevent them from running for office, or even, once in office, hinder their ability to govern effectively and act freely in public. Only two countries, Mexico and Bolivia, have specific legislation addressing violence against women in elections, as noted by the [IPU \(2016\)](#).

Violence can also target women engaging in social movements. For example, [Kishi et al. \(2019\)](#) found that higher proportions of protests featuring women are met with excessive force (e.g. live fire) and interventions (e.g. arrests, tear gas) than demonstrations that do not feature women, especially in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and across Africa.

Research suggests that violence against female politicians is pervasive. Surveys conducted by the [National Democratic Institute in 2017](#) in Côte d’Ivoire, Honduras, Tanzania, and Tunisia found that 55% of female officials were subjected to violence while carrying out political party functions. A [2016 IPU survey of female politicians from 39 countries](#) found that 82% had experienced some form of psychological violence, with 44% reporting having received violent threats. Such violence affects women parliamentarians in all countries, but it is most acute in those moving towards, and advocating for, women’s rights, in countries marked by a general context of insecurity and/or hostility towards such rights. Action against this violence is also prevalent, as noted by [Krook \(2018\)](#): movements such as #WeSaidEnough and #MeTooCongress all indicate norm entrepreneurship around the view that sexual violence against women in politics is neither accepted nor the norm.

Gender-based harassment and violence, though a global concern, can vary by context. A study in Japan by [Dalton \(2017\)](#) found that, despite a few powerful female politicians, Japan’s legislative

assembly has the lowest representation of women among OECD countries, and that the harassment of women in politics is commonplace. Masculine norms and practices that shape the political sphere, including smoking, late-night and early-morning meetings, and minimal childcare facilities are compounded by the long-standing tradition of employing geishas or companions for after work events.

In all, 52% of respondents said they had experienced sexual harassment from another council member or member of staff, and 6 out of the 8 respondents who were the only women in their councils had experienced sexual harassment. The types of sexual harassment they had endured ranged from sexist heckling and taunts about their appearance or marital status to silencing and unwanted touching. Some women were threatened by their own families for engaging in politics. Women politicians in Japan have also experienced being silenced by men who have cut off their microphones or deleted their speeches from council meeting minutes.

A study of female candidates' experiences in Afghanistan's 2018 parliamentary election ([IFES, 2019](#)) found that violence and harassment were often motivated by harmful cultural norms which viewed women's roles in politics as sexualised. At the same time, high rates of sexual harassment against women in politics perpetuate the negative perception that women politicians are immoral. Women candidates reported facing pervasive sexual harassment which, as many of them acknowledged, discourages women from running for office. The assessment found that women's lack of financial resources, in particular, exposes them to sexual abuse by other electoral stakeholders. Women candidates also cited examples of police, elected officials, party leaders and election administrators demanding sexual favours in exchange for financial or political support.

Within this context, becoming a female politician becomes synonymous with being 'guilty' of sexual relations, a fact that further shames survivors of violence and discourages women from exercising their right to political participation. Harassment of women candidates contributes to families' reticence to support female family members who run for office. Respondents also said that, as a result of cultural beliefs, women cannot participate in politics without the active support of their families. As a result, one of the first hurdles women must overcome is to persuade their immediate families to support them in filing as candidates or even just registering to vote. Respondents reported that 'family shame' around women voting and running as candidates has increased since the previous election.

In Egypt, [Hafez \(2014\)](#) has flagged up the issue of the 'Girl in the Blue Bra' image of an unconscious young woman near Cairo's Tahrir Square, which caused a scandal around traditional gender norms. The woman was accused by security forces of taunting men when, in reality, she was kicked and forcibly stripped, and the symbolism of her semi-nude body while also wearing a headscarf prompted national debate. The imagery of women's bodies was used both as a tool by the security forces and as an anchor for activists to destabilise patriarchal gender tropes. A women's rally on International Women's Day in March 2011 in Egypt saw women being verbally and physically attacked, causing many to stay at home.

Women were caught in the middle when violence escalated in the areas around Tahrir Square in Cairo and the security forces clashed with protestors in December 2011. Young women were arrested, and virginity tests were administered by military personnel to humiliate and discredit them. A women's solidarity protest – Egypt's Daughters Are a Red Line – spread in response across the city, with chants that reclaimed revolutionary young women as 'Egypt's daughters' instead of fallen, dishonourable women, thus challenging the allegations of the security forces. During this period, some young men formed a human shield, holding hands to encircle the women in the protest and protect them against harm.

All of these cases illustrate the ways in which violence, and women's bodies, have become weaponised and utilised in the political sphere, and the ways in which this has been bolstered by gender norms. In some cases, however, activists have been able to use cases of violence to gain support, and this has brought people together to fight harmful patriarchal norms and seek justice. In a number of cases, this has helped to amplify women's voices despite the violence that aims to silence them.

Online technology and safety

The proliferation of internet technology and social media has also exposed people to new forms of violence and vulnerabilities. The UN has advocated for governments and companies to address online gender-based abuse while warning against censorship, and a paper for [UNESCO in 2015](#) estimated that 73% of aggressive behaviour, harassment, abusive language and denigrating images in online spaces is aimed at women (most often by a current or former partner).

As noted by [Bardall in 2013](#), new information and communication technologies (ICTs) have sometimes exposed women to new forms of violence, while also providing solutions to track and mitigate violence. ICTs have been used, for example, by awareness-raising platforms and for women's empowerment and advocacy initiatives to support female candidates and engage female online users in politics. Harassers, however, have targeted female politicians, playing into discriminatory gender norms that sexualise and shame the female body, and by distributing sexual photos of female politicians. This has happened in Rwanda, where harassers posted fake nude photos of Diane Rwigara, the only female presidential candidate in the 2017 election.

An [IFES survey \(2019\)](#) on violence against women in politics between 2018–2019 in Afghanistan found that people use social media increasingly to amplify and disseminate attacks on women and their families. Tactics include sharing women candidates' private photos – in which they were not covered by a veil – online; and spreading false allegations about the promiscuity of women candidates and their daughters. As one young woman said: 'We are afraid of being defamed, this is why we don't dare to run for office. When I was younger I always wanted to be a politician but not anymore.' During the post-election violence in Kenya in 2008–09, as noted by [Bardall \(2013\)](#), tribal-based political partisans sent SMS messages to women from opposing tribal-based political groups, threatening them with bodily harm, rape and even death. There is also concern about internet surveillance and repression. The FRIDA Young Feminist Fund has [called for](#) efforts and coalitions to ensure 'holistic security' online that address online bullying, trolling, digital harassment, surveillance and other practices among many feminist groups and individuals online. The full implementation and enforcement of legal protections wider prevention work is crucial to address such abuses while also securing freedom of expression online.

Gendered coverage of candidates in the media

All the evidence suggests that the media treat female and male political candidates differently. An analysis of newspaper coverage of women candidates in Malaysia in 2008 by [Kaur and Shaari \(2012\)](#) found that the language used to describe candidates was often based on gendered stereotypes, which shaped the language, tone, and slant of reporting on women candidates in news stories and headlines in all the different language newspapers: English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. When covering political candidates, it is common for the Malay newspapers to mention the marital status of the women candidates, but not that of the men.

The newspapers tended to discuss the ‘*restu*’ (blessings) of husbands and children, based on stereotypes that women’s involvement in the public sphere must be legitimised by their families. They also discussed women’s physical image and demeanour, including their fashion style, and coverage of women’s positions on issues was comparatively poor when compared with men. Women were even compared to food, such as ‘a hot chilli’.

The use of stereotypical or demeaning images and photos to sexualise, emotionalise and trivialise women is a strong disincentive for women who are considering running for office, and may even pose a direct threat to their personal safety. Private and public media overtly tolerate biased media coverage of female candidates, as seen during the 2011–12 Egyptian elections when the media conceded to demands from conservative parties to prohibit the participation of unveiled women candidates and broadcasters in mixed-group debates. There are also reports of political parties limiting women candidates’ access to party media resources, which also undermines their public visibility.

[Tiessen \(2008\)](#) found that political participation for women in Malawi is shaped by harmful norms, as respondents (men and women) refer to gender norms that perceive women’s exposure to public activities as leading to immoral behaviour (men fear their wives will cheat on them, engage in prostitution, or fail to grant them the respect that they expect). In contrast, societal norms suggest that men are either expected or have the moral strength to resist immoral activities or are free to do as they please.

Several of the women interviewed also commented on their experiences of sexual harassment, including verbal abuse and sexist comments. One respondent reported she was forced to give her senior colleagues sexual favours if she wanted to keep her job. Other respondents reported that women who worked in public settings where other men were working were seen as being at risk of becoming ‘loose’. Tiessen argues that these examples demonstrate the integral connection between the personal and political life of women candidates, which manifests through sexual harassment and discrimination. These findings suggest that media standards to address gender and the sexualisation of candidates in the digital age is a key area for greater work to ensure more safe, equal participation in politics.

4. Programmes, interventions and actions

While the drivers of change are complex and many ‘sticky issues’ and norm-based barriers persist, a number of innovative strategies to challenge them are being employed by NGOs, governments and other actors.

As established in this Guide, **quotas and other legislative guarantees** may support gender norm change, and should be advocated for and implemented on the basis of evidence, with a particular focus on how political parties engage in gender commitments (see section on quotas above for discussion). They should also be employed alongside wider gender equality efforts to support women in politics (including the areas and actions outlined in this section).

Programmes and interventions (both wider gender equality initiatives and targeted interventions to support women in politics) are also important and include those broadly focused on mentoring and civic education, skills and capacity building, and support for women’s groups and movements. A number of programmes that aim to support women’s political representation and engagement are also highlighted here, and were selected to illustrate existing approaches in various contexts (though the list is not exhaustive). Some work to address gender stereotypes among women and men (though

few focus explicitly on norms and norm change), some are part of wider civic education and activity programmes that have a gender component, and others focus specifically on training women. All of these efforts demonstrate potential ways to support change when viewed within the wider perspective of the complex dynamics and contexts of change outlined in this Guide.

Further case study analysis of national contexts, including the role(s) of some existing programmes, initiatives and actions to support gender norm change is an important area for further research.

Violence prevention and protection initiatives

Protection measures to end violence against women in politics can include legal work, social programmes and services, support groups and community-based initiatives. A UN Expert Group on preventing violence against women in politics has [called for the following](#) actions among international institutions, government and civil society:

- a. electoral assistance from UN Agencies to monitor and report violence
- b. establishing gender-sensitive electoral arrangements
- c. training police and security forces, working with political parties and raising awareness
- d. engaging religious and opinion leaders to call for ending violence against women in politics and to support spaces for women's reporting
- e. providing gender-sensitisation programmes' for men, and
- f. exploring the role of political finance in violence against women in politics.

Support for women's groups to help in the prevention of violence against women and their protection against such violence in politics is also critical. In Tanzania the [Coalition Against Sextortion](#) was formed when civil society organisations (CSOs) became very concerned about the widespread practice of 'sextortion', where women in political parties are asked for sexual favours – rather than money – in return for political nominations. In response, these groups launched the Coalition in 2014 alongside a campaign to raise awareness about the pervasive presence of this sexual extortion of women and the harassment they face in public life. CSOs also provided training for women candidates and politicians ahead of the national elections, training them to recognise and avoid sextortion if and when they encountered it. As a result of these efforts, Tanzania's Ethics Secretariat issued guidelines in the spring of 2015 to crack down on sextortion, sending a clear message to public officials that the practice would no longer be tolerated.

Mentoring and education initiatives

Programmes and interventions to support mentoring for women leaders and civic education include efforts to enable women, including youth, to participate in networking and convening activities as well as education services to inform women about political rights and routes for their engagement in politics. Taken together, the following examples demonstrate different approaches to support women leaders through education, awareness raising and CSO partnerships.

In Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, the [Local Governance in South Caucasus/DAYAQ programme](#) worked to improve local governance by fostering women's participation in politics through mentoring support, with financing from BMZ and implementation by GIZ between January 2013 and December

2016. In 2013 its DAYAQ programme in Azerbaijan supported mentoring by establishing support and learning relationships between women from different backgrounds. The aim was to address the challenges of being a woman in a local parliament through an eight-month mentoring programme that had four pillars: Mentoring, Training, Projects and Networks.

Women who were experienced in politics were included as mentors, and 80% of participants reported that the project had helped them to put forward political ideas in their municipalities. Participants inputted into Fael Ol (Take Action!) – a guideline for women’s action. One outcome was the creation of the DAYAQ network of female politicians, which aims to promote dialogue at the national level on gender equality and, therefore, influence the system. Another result has been an annual regional conference for local women politicians from Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

In Trinidad and Tobago, the [Train, Run, Win and Lead](#) initiative was launched by an umbrella network of women’s organisations in 2013 to educate women on the fundamental elements of politics in their country. The programme educates women about who is responsible for what in government, and works to empower them to participate fully in positions of leadership and, ultimately, drive change. Following the first round of trainings, half of the women who ran for office won seats in local elections – almost all of which had previously been held by men.

In Uganda [Action for strengthening institutions and communities in promoting women’s rights \(PWR\)](#) was an EU-funded PWR project (£322,264) implemented by the British Council in partnership with Action for Development (ACFODE), a national CSO, from 2014 to 2016. It aimed to strengthen the participation of women in social and economic life and promote a society where women and men have equal access to opportunities, resources and government development programmes. It focused on gender in four local-district governments in northern Uganda, aiming to increase understanding about women’s rights among 140 elected women councillors, 140 social actors (clan leaders, religious and opinion leaders), 1,600 women from the grassroots level, 80 district and sub-county local government officials and 40 CSOs working in the area of women’s rights. PWR raised awareness about women’s rights and, in particular, the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). As a result, participants formed CEDAW committees in their communities.

Skills, training and capacity building initiatives

Skills, training and capacity building initiatives can support change by providing wider services for women in their communities to enable them to learn, lead and develop new skills. Such initiatives aim to support women’s skills development and networking and offer different models for doing so online and in-person, while considering issues of diversity and access, as demonstrated by the following examples.

In Ethiopia, the [Women Parliamentarians Project \(2010\) was a](#) DFID-funded collaboration between the Active Learning Centre (UK), the British Council (Ethiopia) and the Women, Children and Youth Select Committee, which aimed to enhance the skills of women parliamentarians and increase the awareness of male parliamentarians about gender issues so that they could become positive partners for gender equality. Training focused on speech writing, evidence gathering and other areas. Both male and female MPs shared examples of how their practice regarding gender mainstreaming had changed as a result of the training by, for example, using the gender checklists that were developed, to ask appropriate questions of ministries and demand disaggregated data to assess gender impact. As a result of the training, women MPs increased their knowledge of gender issues and increased their ability and their confidence levels significantly when speaking in public. Reports from the

participants showed that the training also had an impact on women's ability to intervene and participate in the parliamentary process.

In the US, [Running Start](#) aims to get more women engaged in politics and elected to office at a younger age. It introduces young women to the importance of women in leadership and trains them in public speaking, networking, media training and development. The focus is firmly on a younger demographic, and its Young Women's Political Leadership Program trains secondary school girls in public speaking, networking, on-camera media training and platform development. The Running Start/Wal-Mart Star Fellowship places seven university-aged women in the offices of female representatives for a semester-long internship, with each Friday spent in a seminar learning the 'nuts and bolts' of political office.

In the UK, [The Parliament Project #LondonWomenStand](#) partnership with Glitch, change.org, and Twitter provided workshops to share skills for women politicians. This included full day workshops on how to become an elected politician, how to defend yourself online, and how to campaign effectively, and was available for women at any point in their political journey, from those who are interested in learning the basics, to those who have already been elected. Breakout workshops included: 'Your story is your power', to explore how to use personal stories to drive change; 'Digital Self Care'; 'Exploring your political pathway'; 'Digital Self-Defense'; 'The Power of Community'; 'Campaigning on Twitter'; 'How to stand for election'; 'Safety and security on Twitter'; and 'Lights, camera, action'.

Also in the UK, [Equal Power](#) is a partnership of The Fawcett Society, Centenary Action Group, Glitch, Citizens UK, 50:50 Parliament, and the Muslim Women's Network (funded by Comic Relief) that provides a three-year programme offering extensive training on standing for election and active citizenship, inviting participants to join peer-support circles. In 2020 training was made available online, with sessions designed for minority women in particular.

Support for women's groups and movements

Support for women's groups and movements is another important area that enables spaces for women's networking, community engagement and wider social action that can influence women's individual trajectories as well as their ability to act collectively. [ALIGN research on history and gender norm change in Uganda](#) also indicates that women's social movements, including global movements, can help to galvanize support for women's individual and collective action. Funding and capacity building initiatives to support the formation of, and sustain the work of, women's organisations and groups can help to provide spaces where women can connect, gain skills and access further routes to engagement in politics and public life.

One example of a programme targeted to support women candidates and CSOs was the [Women participating in public life \(WPIPL\) programme in Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia](#). WPIPL was funded by the British Government's Arab Partnership Initiative in these four countries from 2012 to 2015, and later extended to Jordan, Lebanon, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where it concluded in March 2017. The programme aimed to build women's capacities and broad-based support to increase their active involvement in public life, including national and local political processes. The project was implemented through three main strategies: Developing community leaders, especially women, aged 18–30 in marginalized populations; Supporting capacity building of CSOs to conduct action research and to influence policy and practice; and Learning, networking and coalition-building. This final component aimed to provide platforms where the participating countries could share experience and through regional learning events.

Oxfam's [Raising Her Voice \(RHV\)](#) initiative also worked to support women's individual and collective action within movements. Funded by the UK government's Governance and Transparency Fund, RHV supported projects in 17 countries worldwide from 2008 to 2013 to enable more than 1 million women to take part in, shape and monitor the decisions that most affect their lives. The programme aimed to strengthen the way in which women's individual and collective voices influence decisions about services, investments, policies and legal frameworks so that worldwide, they could hold accountable those in power – from village leaders to politicians and law-makers. RHV worked with 45 local partners, 141 community activists' groups and more than 1,000 coalition members. For further details see the country case studies on Oxfam's [resources pages](#).

Supporting women's groups, even those not directly linked to politics and public life, can also help. In India, women's self-help groups (SHGs) have been used increasingly as a vehicle for social, political and economic empowerment, as well as a platform for service delivery (see [Kumar et al., 2018](#)). SHG membership is associated with political participation, awareness, and the use of government entitlement schemes, and some programmes focus on funding these groups to enhance women's political representation.

Further learning about the impact of the different initiatives described here, including their efforts to tackle the 'sticky issues' identified in this Guide, can help to advance knowledge on strategies to support gender equality outcomes in this area and would be a welcome contribution to global knowledge on gender norms and politics.

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ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and what works to change – discriminatory gender norms.

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