WOMEN IN POLITICS

GENDER, POWER AND DEVELOPMENT

EDITED BY MARIZ TADROS

Women in Politics

Gender, Power and Development

edited by
Mariz Tadros

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About the Editor

Mariz Tadros is a research fellow at the Institute of Development Studies in the UK. She was formerly a professor of political science at the American University in Cairo and worked for almost ten years as a journalist for *Al-Ahram Weekly* newspaper. Her most recent publications are *Copts at the Crossroads: The Struggle for Inclusive Democracy in Egypt* (2013), *The Muslim Brotherhood in Contemporary Egypt: Democracy Redefined or Confined?* (2012), and two recent IDS Bulletins: *The Pulse of Egypt's Revolt* (January 2012) and *Religion, Gender and Rights at the Crossroads* (January 2011). She works on democratization in the Middle East, religion and development, the politics of gender and development, and Islamist political movements in the Middle East. Her work has featured in the *Guardian*, Opendemocracy and *Middle East Report*.

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Preface

Andrea Cornwall

In recent decades we have seen substantial progress globally in women's access to electoral office – although not nearly as much as to give women anything close to parity in the overwhelming majority of governments around the world. Women's pathways to political power have been facilitated not only by electoral quotas, training and investment in inspiring and equipping women with the means to contest elections. Fundamental to change in the electoral arena have been women's and feminist movements, whose engagement in catalysing women's political participation and channelling women's demands has made profound contributions to redressing the marginalization of women in public life, and to bringing a concern with issues of gender equality into public policy and non-governmental public action.

Women in Politics explores the trajectories of women in and into politics. It injects into a debate dominated by numbers a much-needed focus on the women who run for office, on what motivates and helps them, as well as the barriers and obstacles that they face in entering the arena of formal politics. It asks searching questions about what is needed for more substantive shifts in accountability of the political arena, and the women in it, to women's rights and gender justice. Bringing together research in eight countries – Bangladesh, Brazil, Egypt, Ghana, India, Palestine, Sierra Leone and Sudan – this collection offers some important insights into women's pathways to political power. It forms part of a series, Feminisms and Development, that has grown out of a multi-

country research and communications programme, Pathways of Women's Empowerment (www.pathways-of-empowerment.org). Pathways began in 2006 with the aim of understanding what works to support women to empower themselves, and the intention of looking beyond international development's motorways to the hidden pathways that are changing women's lives. Taking three themes – body, voice and work – as entry points, Pathways developed research and communications projects that sought to bring a fresh perspective to understanding women's experiences of empowerment, disempowerment and positive social change.

With its focus on countries in the global South that are recognized for the disjuncture between democratic governance – recent or older in provenance – and strikingly low levels of representation of women, *Women in Politics* offers many important insights. We learn of the significance of women's families and partners, not simply the use of women as proxies or in dynastic politics, but also tales of supportive partners and parents, lessons about political life learnt from the experience of growing up in political families and being mentored by politician relatives, and the role families can play in constituency building. We come to hear about the limitations of training, especially the short-run training courses offered to women around the time of elections, but also of the positive difference that feminist movements and organizations have made through political education. We find out about the challenges of constituency building, but also of the work that women politicians do at the grassroots in the least favourable contexts that give them sufficient recognition amongst the electorate to win them office.

Cutting through the essentialism that pervades policy debate on women and politics, *Women in Politics* contributes to a growing literature that is more critical and nuanced on questions of the contribution of women's political representation to gender justice. What distinguishes it is the use of a methodological approach that is rare in political science: a valuing of the contribution that can be made to understanding politics by qualitative and life historical

research that is grounded in women's own narratives about their lives and an appreciation of the social and cultural dynamics of political life. The book offers especially important lessons for policy makers in a context where one-size-fits-all remedies dominate, and where there is comparatively little real data – by which I mean data that are grounded in women's actual experiences, rather than numbers that tell stories that reveal little of the realities of women's lives and struggles.

What the studies in this book emphasize is that political engagement does not begin and end with electoral politics. Rather, if we look at politics through the eyes of the women who run for office we can see a landscape of informal political institutions that have provided for them crucial support and staging posts on their journeys into formal politics. Support for those journeys must include support to the women's and feminist organizations that make it possible for women to gain political experience, that mobilize a constituency of women, and that are so important in channelling women's demands.

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INTRODUCTION

Engaging Politically

Rethinking Women's Pathways to Power

Mariz Tadros

This book rethinks women's pathways to power. Its premise is that there is a need to complement the macro-policy focus on narrowing the gender gap in representation by getting the electoral system right. This necessary complement is a bottom-up approach that examines women's pathways of political engagement. Conceptually, this approach assumes an understanding that politics is a broader project than winning a seat in a legislature, and challenges the implicit measurement of political empowerment exclusively in terms of reaching political office. Methodologically, its starting point is women's political trajectories, which are best examined through research methods that allow subjects to define their own concepts and narrate their experiences in their own terms. This represents a departure from some of the more conventional approaches, in which macro-policy is the starting point of analysis (IDEA 2013). The case studies presented here address two critical questions. What undermines women's ability to transform political informal repertoires of power into formal political leadership? And what enabling factors have we overlooked that could potentially play an influential role?

Eight countries across three continents feature in this volume: Ghana, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Egypt, the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), Bangladesh, India and Brazil. For all the historical and contextual variation across these case studies, they all share one common feature: the representation gender gap is substantial.

The political systems of the selected countries may vary: Egypt has experienced two major regime-changing uprisings in 30 months; in Sudan, an authoritarian regime has been under pressure from recurring mass protests. Sierra Leone represents a case study of a post-conflict context; the OPT is one of ongoing conflict; while Bangladesh, Ghana and India are fairly stable democracies. Brazil is, for the first time ever, led by a woman president in a context where resistance to women's representation in legislatures is so deeply entrenched that it succeeds in obfuscating prospects of political empowerment via a quota (see Chapter 8 by Costa and Cornwall). An analysis of the eight country case studies is able to identify patterns of recurring themes and issues, however, despite these contextual differences.

In all the contexts discussed in this volume, women's access to formal political space and representation has been stymied. The Interparliamentary Union's ranking on women's political representation places the case study countries in the bottom half of its table (Bangladesh is ranked 71, Brazil 121, Ghana 111, India 110, Sierra Leone 104 and, while Egypt does not feature on the list, with 2 per cent representation, it would rank 141 along with the Solomon Islands). The only exception is Sudan, ranked 48. However, as Sara Abbas's chapter shows, most of the women in office belong to the ruling party and are there mainly as window dressing: their presence has made little difference to the configuration of power.

A life history approach is used across all the country case studies. This research method is particularly useful in capturing women's entire political pathways, rather than focusing only on the point in this journey they had reached when they assumed office. This allows us to understand how the women define and understand politics, the relationships through which politics is mediated, and the contexts in which the women operate. In some cases a mixed methods approach is used – as in the OPT, India and Brazil, where surveys and focus groups were conducted. All the case studies assume a deep contextual analysis, linking women's trajectories to the political dynamics and history of the country.

The unit of analysis used in these case studies varies. The Egyptian case (Chapter 3) involves an investigation of 40 women who ran in the first post-Mubarak parliamentary elections in 2011–12. A purposive sample was used to ensure a broad spectrum of political, ideological, geographical and religious representation. The Ghana study (Chapter 1) looks at the pathways to political power of a group of District Assembly (DA) women, the lowest tier of governance. The Bangladesh study (Chapter 2) is also based on the lowest political tier, focusing on the political trajectories of women councillors in urban government in three municipalities in Mymensingh, Tongi and Naryanganaj in 2012. Twelve life histories of municipal councillors were collected in total from the three areas. In India (Chapter 6) focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders were conducted in 2012 at district, block and GP (gram panchayat) levels of rural governance. In-depth interviews were also held with key state stakeholders, and 147 life histories of women drawn from each of the levels were also documented. The Sierra Leone study (Chapter 7) focuses on independent women candidates in the 2004 and 2008 local elections. Thirteen in-depth interviews were carried out. The Sudanese case study (Chapter 5) was based on 15 in-depth interviews with women who nominated themselves, as well as those in political office. The interviews were conducted in Khartoum between 2010 and 2011. The case study from Brazil (Chapter 8) focuses on elected women municipal councillors and mayors in the north-eastern state of Bahia.

This variation in the unit of analysis allows for comparison of opportunities and constraints, and the ensuing policy implications, across tiers. A common contextual element across all the case studies is the application of some form of affirmative action – political empowerment programmes provided by a plethora of state and non-state actors with the aim of increasing women's political leadership in governance. Some have experienced high levels of violence in politics (Sierra Leone, Palestine, Egypt, Sudan, Bangladesh) while even those dubbed stable democracies, such as Brazil, have witnessed revolts against the system of governance.

A 'pathways lens' to political empowerment

Broadly, the literature on women in politics has tackled three kinds of representation: descriptive, substantive and symbolic. Descriptive representation refers to the proportion of women present in electoral political bodies. Substantive representation refers to when legislators pursue policy goals that are aligned with the interests of their constituents, although in the case of women's representation there are serious question marks as to whether they represent 'women' and who defines them (Krook 2012: 87). The question of whether women's presence in legislatures increases their substantive representation is a controversial one, in view of the fact that women are not a homogeneous group with common interests, and women's interests and feminist interests may not be completely congruent. In addition, different tiers of legislature provide different opportunities of influence, and the ideological orientation and political inclinations of the regime in power also influences the outcome. The idea of instating a quota of 30 per cent was premised on creating a critical mass of women that would contribute to a substantive representation. Dahlerup's seminal work (1988) suggested that substantive representation would emerge from critical acts, through the ripple effect that women's presence has on other contingencies in politics.

Symbolic representation captures how legislators' presence shapes the beliefs and attitudes held by elites and mass publics (Krook 2012: 155; Krook and Childs 2010). It has also been argued that descriptive representation increases symbolic representation (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005), although Beaman *et al.*'s (2012) study of local representation in India suggests that symbolic representation is more strongly linked to substantive representation – since it is not when there are more women in legislatures that people's perceptions change, but when they pursue agendas that make a difference that they elicit a positive role model effect.

This book seeks to contribute to broadening the debate on political leadership by analysing women's trajectories of engaging

politically as opposed to the extent to which an electoral intervention (law, policy or institution) has succeeded or failed in redressing the gap in representation. The focus on women's trajectories examines their pathways rather than their agendas (substantive representation) or its impact on the polity (symbolic representation). The researchers acknowledge that a focus on women's trajectories risks essentializing actors who are very differently positioned. The intention is not to suggest, however, that they all share a common pathway, or that their ideological inclinations and agendas are unimportant.

Much of the literature examining women's descriptive representation examines processes of candidate selection, trends in political recruitment and cross-national variations (Krook and Schwindt-Bayer 2013: 555–6). By and large, however, these have been macro-policy studies. The micro studies on women's engagement in politics have tended to adopt a supply-and-demand model of candidate selection (Randall 1982; Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Such studies examine those who are eligible to run; those who aspire to run; those who are nominated; and those who are eventually elected. To understand why women fall away at different phases,

> researchers have asked whether women's underrepresentation stems from gender differences in political ambition, causing fewer women than men to consider running (the supply of female aspirants), biases in the recruitment practices of male elites leading them to select fewer women than men (the demand for certain types of candidates), or prejudices on the part of voters preferring to elect men over women (the outcomes of the elections). (Krook and Schwindt-Bayer 2013: 556)

Even when the influence of other factors in affecting 'supply and demand' is acknowledged, studies tend to focus on the formal political factors such as those pertaining to opportunities in political parties (Kolinsky 1991; Norris and Lovenduski 1995; Opello 2006 in Krook and Schwindt-Bayer 2013: 557). An exception in the scholarly literature on descriptive representation

– drawing attention to key elements of women's profiles (personal and professional background) – are the excellent case studies presented in Franceschet *et al.*'s (2012) volume, although they are all framed in terms of the effectiveness of quotas (chapters on France, Argentina, Uganda and Morocco by Murray, Franceschet *et al.*, O'Brien, and Sater respectively).

The scholarly literature has been focused mainly on how to get the macro-level institutional arrangements right to effect increased women's representation, with a particular concentration on the extent to which quotas positively influence their descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation and under what conditions (Caul 2001; Dahlerup 2006; Ballington 2004; Ballington and Karam 2005; Tripp and Kang 2008; Tadros and Costa 2010).

The international community's policy approach, for example in the millennium development goals, established the percentage of women in political office as a proxy for political empowerment. Implicitly, it meant that empowerment was an outcome of having come to office, and the effectiveness of the quota became the primary policy tool for achieving it. Re-envisaging political empowerment not as a destination (political office) or an outcome (greater numbers), but as a pathway may provide us with a more nuanced understanding of the kind of policy shifts needed in order to create an environment enabling women to assume and sustain political leadership (see Pathways of Women's Empowerment 2012: 8–9).

Rethinking the political

Feminist scholarship has highlighted the importance of rethinking the way in which politics has been understood and defined without addressing the bias of its ethnocentric nature (Krook and Childs 2010) and its privileging of the male experience (Pateman 1988). All the case studies highlight the important influence on women's political pathways of informal spaces – arenas through which relations, activities and networks are forged and

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