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The Impact of Women’s Leadership in Public Life and Political Decision-making

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Women's Leadership in Public Life and Political Decision-making¹

Overview

Women's representation as political decision-makers has increased in the past 25-years. In over 20 countries, women comprise more than 40 percent of legislators in the lower or single chamber of parliament (though they also comprise under 10 percent in another 20 countries).² Women are heads of government—meaning they or their party were popularly elected—in 12 countries and hold the symbolic position of head of state in about another 10 (Piscopo 2020). Women's increased representation in these formal leadership positions has transformed policy in areas traditionally associated with women and girls, from women's rights to social issues like healthcare and welfare. This outcome is referred to as *women's substantive representation*. Even though women across the globe understand and experience their gender identities differently, women form a social group and membership in this social group shapes women's lived experiences. Therefore, certain policy areas affect women's lives directly, and so women share interests in these policies even as they may spiritedly disagree about their priorities and about the best ways forward.

Women have an impact on policymaking by bringing their different life experiences, perspectives, and priorities into public life. Women's presence in political institutions is associated with women's substantive representation, from introducing measures to improve women's rights and eliminate violence against women (Piscopo 2014a) to securing more healthcare funding (Mechkova and Carlitz 2020). Women's presence also makes a difference in policy areas where public opinion research shows a significant gender gap in priorities. For instance, women are more likely than men to worry about climate change (Bush and Clayton 2020) and a cross-country study of 18 Western democracies found an association between higher numbers of women officeholders (parliamentarians and cabinet ministers) and stronger environmental protection standards (Atchison and Down 2019).

However, the relationship between women's presence and women's substantive representation is not automatic. Institutional rules can constrain women's impact. For instance, chief executives and legislators both balance the competing interests of multiple stakeholders, but prime ministers and presidents can act more unilaterally than legislators, as the latter are constrained by party platforms and chambers' procedural rules. Assessments of women's impact must account for the kinds of political institutions that women join, and set expectations accordingly. When women cannot affect change because they are too few or too constrained by procedures, but expectations for their impact are high, backlash against women officials may result (Baker 2018). At the same time, institutions can be designed to be *gender sensitive*, meaning they have rules and procedures that accommodate women and ensure women's equal voice in decision-making (Palmieri 2018; Childs 2015). One example is the UK House of Commons' recent decision to allow proxy-voting for members of parliament absent for reasons of childbirth or infant care. This change occurred because women MPs within parliament continually pressed for the rule alteration.³

¹ Avani Johnson provided outstanding research assistance.

² Data from the Interparliamentary Union, accessed September 30, 2020: <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=9&year=2020>.

³ See announcement from Times UK journalist Esther Webb on September 24, 2020: <https://twitter.com/estwebber/status/1309050476776828929?s=20>.

This report examines women’s impact on substantive representation in three formal settings where political leaders make law and policy: (1) legislative institutions; (2) the executive branch, including public administration; and (3) peace processes. For each setting, the impact of women is noted alongside institution-specific constraints on women’s leadership as well as any research gaps. The report then discusses three trends that apply across settings: (i) women are highly qualified to serve; (ii) women’s presence also has impact through symbolic effects; and (iii) women’s impact is attenuated by backlash, resistance, and violence. The report concludes with five recommendations to ensure that women can substantively represent women and that they can exercise political leadership on conditions equal to men.

Women in the Legislative Branch

Impact. The link between women’s numerical presence and women’s substantive representation has been exhaustively studied for the legislative branch. A research gap exists between national legislatures, on the one hand, and subnational legislatures and regional councils, on the other.⁴ Most scholarship concentrates on the former—national parliaments—and finds conclusive evidence that women’s presence leads to substantive representation (O’Brien and Piscopo 2019). Of course, the link is not automatic and is conditioned by various factors, including women’s seniority and incumbency, party membership, district type, committee memberships, their individual preferences and priorities, and other factors (O’Brien and Piscopo 2019). Scholars continue to unpack the contexts and constraints that shape women’s influence over policymaking, but the answer to the central research question—do women represent women?—is a resounding “yes” (O’Brien and Piscopo 2019). Women legislators matter alone, but also when they have sustained ties to women’s groups and organizations in civil society, as these networks provide women legislators with critical support, increase collaboration, and amplify impact (Mechkova and Carlitz 2020).⁵

This report uses “legislature” and “parliaments” interchangeably, to refer to countries’ lawmaking branch of government, though there is one technical difference that matters for assessing women’s impact. Representatives in legislatures enjoy more opportunities to introduce bills than do members of parliament. Due to the fusion of executive and legislative authority in parliamentary systems (the prime minister and cabinet form part of parliament, and do not constitute an independent branch), lawmaking in parliamentary systems usually occurs in cabinets. This means that women in *parliaments* may move the needle less on bill introduction and bill passage than women in *legislatures*, though this outcome is by design and not indicative of women’s failure to represent women.

Early theories of women’s legislative impact centered on the notion of critical mass. The idea held that women faced tougher roads to influence when their numbers were few, and that they would need to comprise significant proportions of the legislative chamber—usually thought to be 30 percent—before they could collectively exercise influence. Though the research reveals a general relationship between *more* women and *more* substantive representation, scholars conducting case studies of policy change also point to important instances where a women’s rights victory was achieved even with few women representatives. Here, “critical actors” (Childs and Krook 2008) play leading roles in brokering agreements with chamber leadership and across parties. For instance, women comprised 15 percent of the Egyptian parliament when a female MP successfully introduced an amendment that reclassified

⁴ In Latin America, women in subnational legislatures in Argentina and Mexico have played key roles in promoting subnational gender quota laws and laws sanctioning violence against women in politics.

⁵ The same is true for women negotiators during peace processes (Krause, Krause, and Bränfors 2018).

female genital mutilation from misdemeanor to felony and increased prison sentences (Abdelgawad and Hassan 2019: 9). In Turkey, women's numbers were few when they overturned customary laws and passed penalties for workplace sexual harassment (Ayata and Tütüncü 2008).

Women have an impact throughout the policy process. An important distinction emerges between what's called substantive representation as process—lawmakers' efforts to set agendas and advocate for policies—and substantive representation as outcome—lawmakers' ability to win statutory change. In terms of process, women in advanced and emerging democracies alike introduce and cosponsor more bills to prevent violence against women, to broaden and deepen gender quotas, and to protect women's rights more broadly (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008; Htun, Lacalle, and Micozzi 2013; Piscopo 2014a). Women legislators also support healthcare reform more than men (Swers 2005). Women legislators with children under 18 introduce bills to improve support for children and families (Bryant and Hellwege 2019). Women also intervene in plenary debates more frequently on policy areas that matter to women (Clayton, Josefsson, and Wang 2017; Piscopo 2011; Xydias 2007). Women also invoke their female identities when speak: in Costa Rica, for instance, women legislators bring gendered perspectives to even traditionally masculine areas, such as talking about how fighting crime and combating corruption benefits mothers and families (Carle, Hinojosa, and Woodall 2018).

In terms of outcomes, research again finds similar patterns in the Global North and Global South. Higher proportions of women legislators are associated with lower defense spending and less military engagement (Koch and Fulton 2011); the prioritization of social welfare spending over military spending (Shair-Rosenfield and Wood 2017); more healthcare spending (Clayton and Zetterberg 2018; Mechvoka and Carlitz 2020); more family-friendly policies like child care, early childhood education and parental leave (Bratton and Ray 2002; Grey 2002; Kittilson 2008; Trimble 1997); and better access to contraception and family planning (Piscopo 2014b). In a recent example, women comprised 24 percent of the members of Tunisia's 2011-2012 National Constitutional Assembly, and they ensured that the new constitution included explicit guarantees for gender equality, gender quotas, protection from violence, the right to education, the right to water, the right to work, and the right to access basic human services (de Silva de Alwis, Mnsari, and Ward 2017:119).⁶

Women legislators even alter tax policies. In Britain, women MPs led the successful charge to lower the value-added tax for sanitary products (Childs and Withey 2006). In another example, many countries levy women's apparel with a higher import tax than men's apparel, but more women's legislative representation is associated with lower import tax rates on women's clothes. Based on a study of 167 countries, researchers estimate that when women have gender parity in the legislature, the annual tax penalty on women's apparel falls by about 324 million USD per country (Betz, Fortunato, and O'Brien 2020).

Barriers to Impact. Women representatives achieve this policy impact even as the structures and norms of parliament do not welcome their presence. From the paintings on the walls to the names of rooms, men history-makers are memorialized. The physical space of parliament is designed for men and men's bodies. In the South African Parliament, for example, the seats were once so high that women MPs' feet could not touch the floor (Ross 2002: 194). Women politicians in Latin America in the 2000s reported

⁶ The 24 percent is reported by the National Democratic Institute, "Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly: Gender Assessment" at <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Tunisia-Gender-Assessment-National-Constituent-Assembly-ENG.pdf> (accessed September 30, 2020).

that many legislative chambers lacked women's bathrooms in accessible locations.⁷ Even seemingly neutral rules about professional attire have gendered consequences, making some women's skirts or dresses deemed unacceptable (and in some contexts, preventing styles of dress that represents MPs' ethnic or indigenous traditions).

Masculine norms also shape parliamentary interactions. In the Westminster democracies, "styles of debate which will typically include jibes, taunts, farmyard noises, finger stabbing" can make speech interventions difficult for women parliamentarians (Lovenduski 2014: 8). Parties control floor time in parliaments, so when women lack access to floor time relative to men, whether due to parties' withholding opportunities or men's heckling or both, the responsibility lies with party leaders, not women. Nonetheless, when women participate, they do hold their own in adversarial debate speech (Shaw 2009) and interruptions do not impede the work of representing women (Och 2020). Linking women's presence to introducing "gentler debate" styles holds women MPs to gendered standards of civilizing politics—standards not demanded of men politicians—and reinforces popular notions that women lack the toughness for politics (Shaw 2009).

Still, designing gender-sensitive parliaments calls attention to eliminating the structures and norms that can make parliaments unfriendly to women, even if women adopt to masculine norms or devise workarounds. It is often women legislators themselves who bring about these changes. In Sweden, women MPs who formed the Gender Equality Group ensured that the Parliament's Women's Room contained photos of women firsts: the first female MP, first female minister, the first female party leader, and the first female speaker (Freindevall and Erikson 2020: 633). Notably, it was a woman leader of the Australian House of Commons—Ann Taylor in 1998—who eliminated the rule that MPs needed to wear top hats when raising points of order.⁸

Making parliaments more gender sensitive includes implementing accommodations for parents and parenthood. Historically most political leaders were men without care responsibilities, meaning parliaments are especially ill-equipped to accommodate working parents. Fewer than half of European Union member states' lower chambers have childcare facilities on site (EIGE 2019: 22). Many legislatures do not allow proxy voting, meaning that legislators with caring responsibilities may face greater difficulty arriving to parliament for late-night, unexpected, or last-minute votes. In the Westminster parliaments, archaic rules forbid the bringing of "strangers" onto the floor—leading Chamber Speakers to compel the removal of women MPs' infants, brought to the chamber for breastfeeding (Franceschet 2019). Australia convened a parliamentary committee to make the Houses of Commons more women-friendly, and ultimately clarified that the prohibition against strangers did not include infants receiving care from MPs—but other Westminster democracies have not yet followed (Franceschet 2019).

Women in the Executive Branch and Public Administration

The executive branch defies easy summaries of women's political impact. First, the power vested in chief executives at the national level varies across countries. Chief executives in democratic, multiparty systems set agendas, but can find themselves constrained when opposition parties control the legislature, for instance. Making decisions often requires delicate (and confidential) negotiations among multiple stakeholders. The greater visibility of presidents and prime ministers creates unique gendered

⁷ Author's own fieldwork in Mexico and Argentina.

⁸ See "Ties, top hats and T-shirts: What is the dress code for MPs?" by Andy Wells in Yahoo News UK, February 5, 2020: <https://au.news.yahoo.com/dress-code-mps-parliament-104556420.html>.

constraints: as the untraditional occupants of the highest political office, women chief executives operate under greater scrutiny and face harsher judgments. Second, in countries where social policy is devolved to subnational governments, governors and mayors also play important roles in substantive representation. Third, the executive branch includes the cabinet and the bureaucracy. Cabinet ministers can affect policy within their ministry, but these “non-legislative” changes may not always be seen by the public or by researchers (Nwankwor 2019). The same point holds true for women leaders in public administration: changes happen vertically, within the policy sector, and may go unnoticed.

Since women’s impact in the executive branch looks different than women’s impact in the legislature, this section begins with the unique barriers faced by women executives, focusing on heads of government. The section then reviews women’s impact by type and level of office: chief executive, subnational executive, and cabinet and bureaucracy.

Barriers to Impact for Women Executives. Women heads of government are visible in ways women parliamentarians are not, meaning gendered assessments of their performance—such as holding women to different and higher standards—are especially pronounced. On the one hand, experimental research suggests that voters in advanced democracies largely do not evince gender bias when evaluating the executive leadership potential of men and women candidates (Taylor-Robinson and Geva 2019). Other research examines party leaders’ popularity, since party leadership is the pathway to executive positions. One study of advanced and emerging democracies found that women party leaders, when politically experienced, have a popularity advantage over men party leaders (Dassonneville, Quinlan, and McAllister, 2020).

On the other hand, a popularity advantage does not necessarily translate into an electoral advantage. Men still win more party leadership races than women (O’Neill and Stewart 2009; Dassonneville, Quinlan, and McAllister, 2020). And once in executive office, women chief executives are judged differently. Research examining presidential approval ratings in Latin America and Asia found that women are judged more harshly on security and corruption than men, even when women and men govern during similar circumstances (Carlin, Carreras, and Love 2019; Reyes-Housholder 2020). Women are also forced from executive office faster than men (O’Neill, Pruyssers, and Stewart 2019). The Latin American cases underscore these findings.⁹ President Laura Chinchilla oversaw economic growth similar to that of previous administrations, but left office perceived as the most disastrous president in recent memory. President Dilma Rousseff of Brazil was impeached for commonplace corruption practices, without evidence that she either ordered the corruption or enriched herself.

Greater visibility combined with higher performance standards may constrain women executives’ ability to undertake substantive representation. Women executives acting to benefit women are often seen as too biased or radical. For instance, studies of women chief executives and cabinet appointments in European and Anglophone democracies conclude that women prime ministers appoint *fewer* women to cabinet than men (Annesley, Beckwith, and Franceschet 2019; O’Brien et al 2015). Women chief executives may wish to raise the number of women in cabinet, but they end up appointing male ministers because they face political pressure to respect the male-dominant status quo (Annesley, Beckwith, and Franceschet 2019). Similarly, a study comparing when Brazilian mayors adopted participatory policy councils or participatory budgets found no evidence that female mayors were more

⁹ See Jennifer Piscopo, “Latin America’s Female Leadership Void,” in *The New York Times*, February 5, 2018 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/05/opinion/michelle-bachelet-women-politics.html>).

inclusive than male mayors; instead, women mayors adopted these participatory practices strategically, around policy areas that benefited male constituencies, such as sports (Funk 2015).

Impact of Women as Presidents and Prime Ministers. Given their few numbers, research on women chief executives primarily takes the form of case studies (unlike research on women in legislatures, where scholars use both case studies and multi-country quantitative analyses). In Liberia during her first term, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf recruited more women into the security and police sectors, and introduced a specialized court to prosecute violence against women (Bauer and Okpotor 2013: 90). European prime ministers like Norway's Gro Harlem and Germany's Angela Merkel strengthened family leave provisions and increased funding for early childhood education, respectively (Jalalzai 2019: 11).

Among Latin America's four recent women presidents—Michelle Bachelet of Chile (2006-2010 and 2014-2018), Cristina Fernández de Kirchner of Argentina (2007-2015), Laura Chinchilla of Costa Rica (2010-2014), and Dilma Rousseff of Brazil (2011-2016)—Bachelet stands out as the most vocal supporter of women's rights. During her first term, Bachelet expanded Chilean women's access to contraception, passed laws that protected working mothers from employment discrimination, and strengthened the executive branch's women's policy agency (Franceschet 2018). In her second term, Bachelet spearheaded an ambitious electoral reform that included a 40 percent gender quota and oversaw the liberalization of abortion in cases of sexual assault, fetal impairment, or danger to the mother's health or life (Franceschet 2018). In Brazil, Rousseff expanded funding for the women's ministry (even as she combined this ministry with other portfolios) and prioritized the construction of women's shelters and expansion of prenatal and neonatal support programs (even as feminists criticized these initiatives' vision and implementation) (dos Santos and Jalalzai 2021).

The two women presidents who openly eschewed the "feminist" label, Fernández in Argentina and Chinchilla in Costa Rica, still implemented policies that benefited women. Chinchilla's signature program established elder and childcare centres throughout the country, which facilitated women's ability to pursue paid employment (Jalalzai 2015: 233-235). Fernández likewise implemented many policies that benefited working-class and poor women (Barnes and Jones 2018). Looking at the four Latin American cases together, one study concluded that women chief executives like Bachelet succeeded at women's substantive representation thanks to Bachelet's more extensive ties with elite feminists in civil society (Reyes-Housholder 2019).

Impact of Women Executives at the Subnational Level. Some research looks at women executives at the subnational level. In Brazil, women mayors are not more likely than men mayors to institute participatory policy processes (Funk 2015), but they do appoint more women to the public administration (Meier and Funk 2017) and raise budget allocations in traditionally feminine issue areas, such as education, healthcare, and social assistance (Funk and Philips 2019). In India, some states have a lottery system that reserves certain municipalities for women mayors. The municipalities assigned to elect women mayors are associated with multiple positive outcomes, such as improved water portage systems, higher reporting of crimes against women, and stronger property rights and control over inheritance (Brulé 2020).¹⁰

Impact of Women in Cabinet and Bureaucracy. Women in cabinet may influence policy horizontally—that is, shape the policies of government as a whole—as well as vertically—that is, within their own

¹⁰ Brulé's research reaches the conclusion about the property rights. The other outcomes are drawn from her summary of the existing research.

ministry. Horizontally, some policy outcomes associated with greater proportions of women legislators also appear for greater proportions of women cabinet ministers. The more women ministers, the more generous state-guaranteed parental leave (Atchison and Down 2009); the more female-friendly the country's employment policies overall (Atchison 2015); and the greater the public health expenditure and the better the health outcomes, like life expectancy (Mavisakalyan 2014). Women cabinet ministers in Ghana and Botswana advocated for legislative reforms that introduced more property rights protections for women (Bauer and Okpotor 2013: 90-91). And, more women in cabinet increases the sub-ministerial appointments of women in all the ministries, including ministries headed by men (Field 2020). Vertically, women ministers expand opportunities for women and introduce women's concerns within their ministry. In South Africa, women ministers increased employment opportunities for women in their sectors, such as female ministers in charge of public works and energy recruiting more women for construction and mining, respectively (Nwankwor 2019: 13). Overall, women ministers raise budgets for women's programs and encourage program directors to better account for women's interests and needs.

Also at the national level, more women in top foreign policy positions makes the country's foreign policy more focused on women's and women's issues. For instance, women foreign policy leaders are more likely to oversee foreign aid programs concerned with gender equity and gender empowerment (Bashevkin 2014). Sweden and Mexico have feminist foreign policies, and Canada and France have feminist international assistance policies, initiatives that grew from women's leadership within foreign affairs ministries. Feminist diplomacy means supporting gender equality abroad and mainstreaming gender issues into international resolutions. Turning to the bureaucracy, research from the United States finds various outcomes related to the idea of representative bureaucracy, meaning the idea that bureaucrats also represent constituencies and affect policy outcomes. More women police officers are associated with more reports and arrests for sexual assault (Meier and Nicholson-Crotty 2006), and more women in social welfare agencies leads to more enforcement of child support from absent fathers (Wilkins and Keiser 2006), for example.

Research Gaps. Women chief executives and prime ministers are well-studied, though quantitative comparative analyses of women presidents and prime ministers' substantive representation are rare. There are few women chief executives, they operate in very different national contexts and face very different political realities, and they make decisions that balance complex and competing interests. Nonetheless, case studies of women chief executives have revealed important policy effects, though less is known about the policy impact of women executives at the subnational level and in the cabinet and bureaucracy.

The coronavirus pandemic also poses new research questions. Covid-19 has affected not just public health but the economy and society, leading some to wonder: will women leaders manage Covid-19 differently?¹¹ Current research finds no relationship between women presidents and prime ministers and disease control measures like mortality (Piscopo 2020), but suggests that women leaders do prioritize the pandemic's social impacts by expressing more empathy and concern in their speeches (Dada et al 2020) and by investing more in social protection measures around unemployment and housing and food insecurity (Funk 2020).

¹¹ For an overview of the existing research, see the August 26, 2020 *Washington Post* piece by Jennifer Piscopo and Kendall Funk, "Are women leaders better at fighting the coronavirus" (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/08/26/are-female-leaders-better-fighting-covid-19/>).

Women in Peace Processes

A vast and separate body of practitioner and academic research focuses on women's participation in peace processes and peacebuilding, from their role as former combatants to their sustained engagement as civil society activists and human rights defenders. Women participate in peace and security in numerous ways, but this report highlights one formal way: women's influence at the negotiating tables where peace agreements are forged.

The more women that participate in peace processes, the more longstanding the peace (Krause, Krause, and Bränfors 2018).¹² Women remain underrepresented as peace agreement signatories: of the 130 peace agreements signed between 1990 and 2014, women signed only 13. Yet those 13 agreements are implemented more thoroughly when compared to others, because women peace negotiators increase the influence of women's civil groups in redacting and monitoring the agreement. These connections therefore make agreements more representative of different stakeholders and build the post-agreement coalitions necessary for holding leaders accountable for following through.

One hundred percent of the agreements with women signatories—compared to 75 percent of fewer of all-male agreements—included ceasefire and disarmament commitments, promises of constitutional reform, provisions for economic and social development, human rights protections, reintegration of combatants, and detailed timelines for implementation (Krause, Krause, and Bränfors 2018). In Guatemala and El Salvador, for instance, former women combatants who sat at the negotiating table ensured provisions for women's land access and in Northern Ireland, women representatives secured more provisions for victims' rights and reconciliation. Overall, peace agreements are more likely to contain gender provisions when women participate in elite peace processes (True and Riveros-Morales 2019).

Colombia offers an excellent example of women transforming peace agreements. The 2012-2016 peace process between the Colombian government and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia included a Gender Sub-Commission, established in 2014 and tasked with mainstreaming gender into the agreement (UN Women 2018b: 32). The final round of negotiations, which took place in Havana in 2015, counted 18 women representatives from different civil society organizations, as well as the women members of the government and rebel group delegations (Céspedes-Báez and Jaramillo Ruiz 2018). The 2016 peace accords contain over 100 gender provisions that recognize the unique experiences of women during the conflict and that require women's participation in post-conflict recovery projects; these projects encompass topics such as land reform, political participation, victims' protections, and rural governance (True and Riveros-Morales 2019: 36). The radical inclusiveness of the agreement has prompted some backlash and hindered implementation (Paarlberg-Kvam 2019), but the role of women negotiators in putting women's issues and concerns "on paper" is significant.

Barriers to Impact and Research Gaps. Like legislatures where women remain dramatically underrepresented, the largest barrier to women's leadership and impact on peace agreements is their inclusion in the first place. Also like legislatures, the peace process design must be gender-sensitive, meaning women must receive equal chances to speak and exert influence over outcomes. The persistent connection between armed conflict, on the one hand, and men and masculinity, on the other, means that women struggle to have their concerns taken seriously in peace processes (UN Women

¹² The more women in the legislature, the more peace lasts as well, primarily because women legislators redirect military spending to social welfare programs and improve elite credibility (Shair-Rosenfield and Wood 2017).

2018a). Even in Colombia, women were not included in the initial peace process design: the Sub-Commission formed in 2014, after women's civil society organizations protested women's exclusion (Céspedes-Baez and Jaramillo Ruiz 2018).

The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 has played a critical role in legitimizing women activists' demands for their place at the negotiating table. That said, research gaps remain about *how* women participate in the minutia of peace negotiations, with researchers relying largely on observer accounts (Céspedes-Baez and Jaramillo Ruiz 2018; Paarlberg-Kvam 2019) and the text of the final accords (Krause, Krause and Bränfors 2018; True and Riveros-Morales 2019). Peace negotiations often require secrecy, reducing scholars' ability to use to analyze women's impact using formal records. Unlike legislative scholars, who can measure quantitative outcomes like how often women talk or what resolutions women introduce, peace researchers rely more participants' qualitative experiences—provided those participants are at liberty to speak.

Three Themes about Women Leaders' Influence

Women's Capabilities. A common misperception holds that women, due to their systematic marginalization, are less qualified and prepared for political office than men. Yet most political leaders are drawn from their countries' dominant social groups (with the exception of peace processes, which engage stakeholders from formal politics and from civil society, rebel movements, and social movements). Female political leaders' elite status may make them unrepresentative of the population as a whole, but the same is true for male political leaders. However, women's elite status means they will resemble men in terms of their educational and professional credentials. Studies from Latin America, Europe, Asia, and Africa confirm that men and women lawmakers are highly educated and politically experienced upon receiving their positions (O'Brien and Piscopo 2018). Even when women are elected under gender quotas, their talents and qualifications match those of men (O'Brien and Piscopo 2018). Moreover, gender quotas (in place in more than 75 countries worldwide) are *more* likely to push aside the less-talented men than they are to elevate the unprepared women (Besley et al 2017).

In the executive branch, while being the "wife of" was a common path to becoming president or prime minister in earlier generations, today most women chief executives are professional politicians with credentials comparable to those of men (Jalalzai 2019: 6). Likewise, most ministers—women and men—have professional qualifications and policy experience that match their posts (Annesley, Beckwith, and Franceschet 2019). These points matter for countering narratives that women's lack of impact or failure to undertake substantive representation is explained by women's deficits in merit or preparation for their posts.

Symbolic Power. Political leaders do more than make policy. In holding office, they embody particular notions about who "should" manage government and public affairs. Men's dominance of political office reinforces notions that women are simply not suited for public life. Consequently, women leaders also serve as symbols, and their presence transforms voters' attitudes and beliefs about women's capacity to govern and about the political system itself. The more diverse the officeholders, the more the government signals to citizens that it takes inclusion and fairness seriously.

Research supports these conclusions. First, women officeholders positively affects citizens' views of government. The more women in the legislature, the more voters see their political system as democratic, legitimate and trustworthy (Atkeson and Carillo 2007; Clayton, O'Brien, and Piscopo 2019;

Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005).¹³ Second, women officeholders erode citizens' attachment to traditional gender roles. Seeing women legislators or women executives makes women *and* men more likely to believe that women belong in public life (Alexander 2012, Beaman et al 2009). Third, women's presence in public life increases women's political engagement. The more women parliamentarians, the more women citizens participate in politics, from voting to following politics in the news and discussing politics with friends (Barnes and Bouchard 2013; Desposato and Norrander 2009; Hinojosa and Kittilson 2020). The same holds true for women executives: women in countries governed by female presidents are more likely to vote, become involved with political campaigns, and participate in local political meetings (Reyes-Housholder and Schwindt-Bayer 2016).¹⁴ Women's political representation also increases women citizens' trust in government and belief in democracy (Hinojosa and Kittilson 2020), as well as their desire to run for office (Wolbrecht and Campebl 2007).

Backlash, Resistance, and Violence. Political institutions remain dominated by men, and resistance and backlash to women's increased presence appears across settings. When women leaders face resistance and backlash, their ability to affect change will be circumscribed.

Though recently conceptualized as violence against women in elections or violence against women in politics (Krook 2020), concerns with resistance and backlash to women's increased presence are longstanding. Research on gender and politics long showed that women who entered male dominated political space faced gendered forms of opposition (O'Brien and Piscopo 2018; Piscopo and Walsh 2020). Resistance included stigmatization (such as name calling and devaluing women's qualifications and credentials), marginalization (such as exclusion from important meetings), and outright hostility (such as being interrupted more frequently or denied the floor). Resistance also appears as harassment and assault, from sexist jokes to physically threatening women lawmakers with sexual assault or physical harm. Threats and attacks are also visited upon women's property and directed at her staff and family members. These practices convert from opposition to backlash when they increase in frequency or intensity: as more women gain political power, their presence triggers anxiety about men's status loss, and opponents therefore step up their attacks' intensity and frequency (Piscopo and Walsh 2020). Importantly, assaults occur in the physical spaces of politics, but also online, with the virtual space increasingly becoming where women politicians receive derogatory, hateful, and threatening messages.

Important research gaps remain in understanding the extent, motivations, forms, and impact of the resistance, backlash, and violence faced by women officeholders (Bardall, Bjarnegård and Piscopo 2020, Piscopo and Walsh 2020; UN Women 2018). Researchers suggest that not all women experience the same intensity of abuse. More violence appears aimed at women who more openly threaten the male-dominated status quo: those with highly visibility (Rheult, Rayment, and Musualan 2019); members of racial and ethnic minorities (Kuperberg 2018); and those who advocate for women's and feminist issues (Krook 2020). Gendered abuse, from interruptions in meetings to sexual and physical assault, make the political playing field uneven, dangerous, and unjust. Threats and attacks even drive women's early exits from political life or make them unlikely to consider political careers at all (Bauer and Darkwah 2020; Krook 2020). Resistance, backlash, and violence do not just constrain or limit women officeholders' impact; they aim to prevent women from entering public life in the first place.

¹³ These findings come from national legislatures. At the subnational level, researchers find mixed or no results (see O'Brien and Piscopo 2019 for an extended discussion).

¹⁴ Though other scholars find no results in studies of women executives (see Jalalzai 2019 for an extended discussion).

Policy Recommendations

#1: Build gender-sensitive institutions that eliminate discrimination and political violence against women. International organizations and researchers have published various guides to creating gender-sensitive parliaments (see Palmieri 2018 for a review). In any political institutions, best practices include codes of conduct, such as codes prohibiting sexual harassment in politics, and ombudspersons that allow officeholders and staff members to bring their concerns forward to individuals outside of the institution's hierarchy. For instance, the gender equity unit in Mexico's federal electoral court is not formally classified as an ombudspersons office, but does work to promote gender sensitivity and gender equality among the electoral institute's staff. Political parties can also establish codes of conduct. For example, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) offers parties a sample code of conduct for campaigning during elections.¹⁵ This code is not gender-sensitive, but could become so by, for instance, including commitments to ending the practices that discriminate against women, such as banning derogatory and sexist language. Codes of conduct can also encompass officials' behavior once in elected office, such as distributing legislative leadership opportunities equitably.

The coronavirus pandemic also poses new challenges for gender-sensitive parliaments. As more political work moves on-line, parliaments must ensure that women MPs have equal access to remote work options; that in cases where parliaments remain partially in-person and partially online provides, participating remotely conveys no disadvantage in speaking time or influence over policymaking. Moreover, women MPs and other women officials must participate equally in all Covid-19 related assessments, planning, and decision-making.¹⁶ Women are dramatically underrepresented in countries' Covid-19 task forces (van Daalen et al 2020) and in governments' Covid-19 briefings to the press and the public (Smith 2020).

#2: Create formal networks that support women within institutions. Political decisions are rarely made unilaterally. Formal networks or groups of women substantially increase their power in political institutions. In legislatures, standing committees on women and gender equality shape substantive representation. Legislative committees typically review legislation, decide whether bills advance to the floor for plenary votes, and request substantive revisions as part of moving the bill forward. Legislative committees on women and gender create important spaces for women to collaborate across party lines and are associated with the increased substantive representation of women's interests and women legislators' increased influence over policy outcomes overall (Piscopo 2014c; Holman and Mahoney 2019).

Less formal options in legislatures include women's caucuses or cross-party women's groups. Caucuses or groups cannot shape policy directly, but they play key roles in making institutions more gender-sensitive and in setting agendas for women's rights and gender equality. These networks connect women across party lines, provide professional development opportunities, and increase women's collective influence by helping them speak in a singular, unified voice (Piscopo 2014c). In the Swedish Parliament, the Speaker's Gender Equality Group is a permanent body comprised of one representative from each political party and tasked with analyzing and improving the gender sensitivity of parliamentary practices and norms (Freidenvall and Eriksson 2020). In Uruguay, the women's caucus

¹⁵ See "Code of Conduct for Political Parties: Campaigning in Democratic Elections" at <https://www.idea.int/es/publications/catalogue/code-conduct-political-parties-campaigning-democratic-elections>.

¹⁶ Drawing partially from Sarah Childs and Sonia Palmieri, "Patience Ladies; Gender-Sensitive Parliamentary Responses in Times of Crisis" (unpublished working paper) and my own research.

supported legislation on topics ranging from violence against women to reproductive rights and labor rights for domestic workers, and in Uganda, the women's caucus promoted initiatives that would prohibit female genital mutilation (Johnson and Josefsson 2016). Similar networks are found in executive branch institutions, though they are not called caucuses or women's groups. For instance, the Association of Women Electoral Counselors in Mexico unites the women serving on Mexico's electoral management bodies.

#3: Create formal networks that bridge women officeholders to activists and organizations in civil society. From legislatures to peace processes, connections between women officeholders and women's civil society organizations have been critical for articulating agendas and winning policy change. These relationships can be formalized, as with Women as Multiple (Mujeres en Plural) in Mexico, which connects women legislators and women leaders in the electoral management bodies to women activists, journalists, and other civil society members. Mujeres en Plural led the 2011 process that persuaded the electoral court to eliminate all exemptions to Mexico's gender quota law and later supported the adoption and implementation of gender parity (Piscopo 2016). Recently, Mujeres en Plural has supported women legislators seeking approval of a law sanctioning violence against women in politics. Like women's caucuses and women's groups, networks such as Mujeres en Plural help women find common ground and raise their collective voices in support of policy change. The backing of these networks supports women officeholders undertaking substantive representation.

#4: Create forums that elevate women's voices and policy interests. Caucuses, groups, and networks meet and work routinely, but agenda-setting events of limited duration also increase women's impact. In Mexico, South Africa, Montenegro, and Spain, "Women's Parliaments" are when women lawmakers, in partnership with women's civil society organizations, take over the parliamentary chamber for short period, to articulate priorities and establish policy goals.

The recent experience of the Catalan parliament is illustrative (Verge 2020). In the Spanish region of Catalonia, women's representation in the regional parliament increased from 5 percent in 1980 to 44 percent in 2018, but the 2018 selection of parliamentary leaders resulted in a chamber leadership comprised of just one woman and six men. Following the outcry from women legislators and feminist activists, the Speaker of the House agreed to a gender audit (commissioned to external consultants) and a gender action plan (drafted by a committee comprised of representatives from each parliamentary party group, the Speaker's office, and chamber staff). Among the activities that formed part of this audit and plan, the legislature convened a day-long Parliament of Women, in which women MPs participated alongside 60 civil society organizations drawn from the Women's National Council of Catalonia. The Women's Parliament embodied the Catalan parliament's commitment to gender equality and the final declaration was prepared under consensus decision rules, which gave women MPs from small parties equal voice (Verge 2020: 11-12). Following the Women's Parliament, a reform to the Gender-Based Violence Law is now on the agenda.

#5: Aim gender sensitive training to those with power to be women's allies. Training for women candidates and women parliamentarians is a popular development tool, one that empowers women officeholders to use their voices (Piscopo 2019). At the same time, training for women also reinforces perceptions that men have natural aptitudes for politics, whereas women must improve upon their deficiencies (Piscopo 2019). For instance, *after* participating in women's training programs, women in India and Canada were more likely to attribute outcomes such as being excluded from meetings as caused by their lack of communication skills, rather than by men's gender bias (Clover et al 2011). Training in the Global South also risks distancing women from their communities, by making them seem

'white' and culturally removed (Baker 2018). This research—combined with research demonstrating the importance of gender-sensitive institutions and ending violence against women in politics—suggests the importance of reorienting training at the gatekeepers and the perpetrators of bad behavior: men officeholders. Anti-bias trainings targeted at the dominant group can, however, increase resentment and backlash if not deployed properly. Trainings must be culturally-specific modules that engage but do not alienate dominant group members (see Hayes et al 2020 for best practices).

In summary, gender sensitive institutions level the playing field for women officeholders and can breakdown men's resistance to women's inclusion. Platforms for women to collaborate within their institution and with civil society enhance women leaders' ability to shape policy. Taken together, these initiatives can raise the impact of women in decision-making.

Summary of Key Points

- ✓ Women's different life experiences and perspectives means that, on average, women's descriptive representation leads to women's substantive representation.
- ✓ The research from women in parliaments especially supports a link between women's presence and women's policy impact.
- ✓ Women in public life and in decision-making also serve as symbols of their countries' inclusivity and democratic nature, and can transform citizens' attitudes about traditional gender roles and encourage more women and girls to participate in politics.
- ✓ Substantive representation is constrained by the procedural rules of the institutions that women join and lead, so failures in substantive representation are not necessarily because women lack the capacity, willpower, or interest.
- ✓ Resistance, backlash, and opposition can constrain women's impact in politics and even cause women to leave politics entirely.
- ✓ Creating spaces for women in public life to network with each other and with women in civil society enhances substantive representation and improves accountability.
- ✓ Gender-sensitive institutions ensure that women exercise leadership in conditions free from discrimination and violence.

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