

Political Ambition and the question of Women's Political Representation

Moamenla Amer and Yashikala Jamir Ao

Abstract

Men have more formal control over political representation since they possess a majority or a sizable majority of seats. The women's representation in legislatures significantly impacts a political system, indicating gender equality and societal inclusion; however, their absence implies prevalent gender bias and discrimination. Women encounter difficulties in the recruitment phase, in the selection phase, and in the election phase. Much of the reasons for women's low representation are because fewer women choose to run and the decision to run for office is driven by political ambition. Therefore, understanding political ambition of women may constitute one step in resolving women's under representation because having political ambition becomes a strong stimulus to contest election and hopefully becoming an elected representative. The objective of the study is to examine the impact of institutional characteristics, individual factors and cultural factors which may have an impact in shaping political ambition of women. Factors that determine political ambition of women are long-standing and deeply rooted. They include the way women are socialized into politics, potential bias of political party and personal factors.

Keywords: Political representation, political ambition, women legislatures, socio-cultural factors, individual factors and institutional barriers

Introduction

Men currently have a majority or a sizable majority of seats in the majority of seats in the majority of parliaments, giving them more legal control over political representation. According to IPU only 6 countries have achieved 50 per cent or more women in the national parliament - Rwanda with 63.8 per cent, Cuba with 55.7 per cent followed by Nicaragua with 55.0 per cent, Mexico with 50.2 per cent, Andorra with 50.0 per cent and United Arab Emirates with 50.0 per cent. India stands at 152nd position with 13.8 per cent which is lower than its neighboring countries like Nepal which stands at 56th position with 33.5 per cent and Pakistan at 137th position with 17.0 per cent and. Female representation stands at 14 per cent in India's national parliament and close to 9 per cent in state legislative bodies (International Parliamentary Union January 2025).

What is equally puzzling is the contrast in the share of women in positions of political authority observed between countries, with developed nations like the United States, Great Britain and Japan having women legislators below the world average and lesser developed countries like Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Mozambique and Cameroon having relatively large proportion of women in positions of political power (International Parliamentary Union 1999). Across regions as well the pattern of women's political authority is confounding. Asia has on average, a higher proportion of women legislatures in the lower house of parliament than Europe (excluding the Scandinavian Countries). Sub-Saharan Africa, which lags behind in most socio-economic indicators, performs better than the Pacific Rim countries in this regard and is only a few percentage points behind Europe and the Americas in the percentage of women parliamentarians (International Parliamentary Union 2001).

Rule by the many cannot be attained if women, constituting more than half of 'the many', are excluded from leadership positions. As such, a deficit of women in political decision-making constitutes a deficit of democracy (Tremblay 2007, 535). The representation of women in legislatures has significant implications for a political system as it shows that women are equal and included in society, while their absence suggests pervasive gendered prejudice and discrimination (Sawer 2002, 5).

While many factors contribute to depressing the number of women representatives, question of political ambition play a significant role. A recent contribution to this literature comes from Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox. In their work, *It Takes a Candidate* and the follow-up, *It Still Takes a Candidate*, the authors identify the gap in political ambition between women and men as one key reason for the tremendous disparity between the number of women and men who hold elected office (Lawless and Fox 2005, 3). If we hope to fully understand the pervasive lack of gender parity in descriptive representation, then it is essential to address the question of gender parity in political ambition as well, and what experiences do and do not engender this ambition (Mo, Conn and Anderson-Nilsson 2019, 865). Therefore, understanding political ambition of women constitutes one step in resolving women's underrepresentation because having political ambition becomes a strong stimulus to contest election.

Importance of Women's Political Representation

The representation of women in legislatures has significant implications for a political system as it shows that women are equal and included in society, while their absence suggests pervasive gendered prejudice and discrimination. There are several arguments as to why women's political representation should increase women's—and often men's—levels of political engagement (Atkeson 2003, 1049–1051), knowledge (Fridkin and Kenney 2014, 1017-1031), activism

(Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006, 238–241), willingness to discuss politics Hansen 1997, 73-103) and positivity about the political process (Karp and Banducci 2008, 109–111). As the representation of women in politics expands, their psychological engagement in political matters grows stronger, their participation in political discourse becomes more frequent, and the perception of political effectiveness increases.

The visibility of women in politics may also encourage other women, especially young women, to pursue political and leadership roles, indicating a role model effect. Prior research has shown the benefits of political role models for girls and young women. Campbell and Wolbrecht find that when female political leaders attain greater national visibility through the media, girls engage in political discussions more frequently and, therefore, are more likely to report increased levels of anticipated political involvement (Wolbrecht and Campbell 2017, 419-422).

Women's presence in parliament therefore has ripple effects far beyond the legislature itself. A study in West Bengal shows that mandated representation of 20 women as leaders of village councils has significant effect on policy decisions. The rural women are provided with more resources related to public goods such as fuel for cooking, road construction and accessible drinking water with women elected under the reservation or quota policy. The same study also shows that women are more likely to participate in the policy-making process if the leader of their village council is a woman (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2001, 1415-1424).

Rule by the many cannot be attained if women, constituting more than half of 'the many', are excluded from leadership positions. As such, a deficit of women in political decision-making constitutes a deficit of democracy (Tremblay 2007, 535). A political system that more completely reflects the diversity of individuals may be seen as more genuine and engagement and with that, the system might prove more desirable as a result. When women candidates descriptively and substantively represent women, they remind citizens that they are able to govern (Mansbridge 1999, 628-657).

The participation of women in politics improves democratic government. Enhancing the range of perspectives inside political institutions strengthens the legitimacy and credibility of democratic regimes. The process of decision-making that include women reflect the principles and the values of equal representation and participation, hence cultivating trust and confidence in democratic institutions. The presence of women enhances accountability and transparency, reduces corruption which results in better government and increased public trust. (Goswami et al. 2023, 1989)

The prospects for increasing the proportion of women representatives are highly dependent on the political ambitions of women who seek election or are occupants of elective office. It is from among the ranks of these women that many future

female candidates are likely to come. To what extent the elected women will exercise influence in the governing bodies (state/local) may depend upon their level of political ambition. If they want to be influential they have to remain in office for a longer time.

Barriers to Political Ambition

Although there are a variety of explanations for why the descriptive representation of women in politics remains relatively low, a major factor that has been empirically observed is that women are simply less likely than men to run for office (Lawless, Fox, and Baitinger 2014, 28-35). To truly explain the pervasive absence of gender equality in descriptive representation, we must also ask questions about gender parity in political aspiration and what experiences do and do not generate such desire. Hence, recognizing the political desire of women is one step towards fixing women's underrepresentation, since having political ambition is a major stimulant to fight election

Even in the early stages, prior to the recruitment and selection process, an important bottleneck for the representation of women occurs (Kjaer and Kosiara-Pedersen 2019, 299-304). And this bottleneck comes in the shape of political ambition. It is well-established that women have lower levels of political ambition than men (Coffé et al. 2022, 191-194). This gap is particularly noticeable at the early “nascent” stage of ambition – that is an initial interest in running for office that is crucial for developing concrete political aspirations (Bernhard, Shames, and Langan Teele 2021, 379-382). This discrepancy between men's and women's levels of nascent political ambition may negatively affect women's recruitment, selection and eventual election.

Systemic barriers embedded in political recruitment practices and party cultures play a pivotal role in limiting women's pathways to political leadership (Collignon 2024, 363-67). These barriers create uneven playing fields, reinforcing the perception that women lack sufficient ambition, when in fact, structural constraints are at play throughout the political recruitment process. Individual factors may play a role, such as the evaluation of one's own capacities (Dahl and Nyrup 2021, 199-205), personal economic circumstances, personality traits (Allen and Cutts 2020, 11-18), or perceptions about politics (Pate and Fox 2018, 166-171).

Research has identified various internal and external factors that affect political ambition. They cannot be understood in isolation because they are part of the comprehensive reality women face when they decide to participate in politics (Akirav 2025, 81-99). The internal factors include self-perceptions, family life and aversion to competition (Preece, Bogach Stoddard, and Fisher 2016, 561-577). The external factors include candidates' recruitment methods and education (Crowder-Meyer 2013, 390-394). Women tend to be significantly less confident in their political abilities and qualifications (Niven, Straka, and Mhajne 2020, 396-398). Women have

more concerns about how engaging in politics would affect the lives of their close family and friends. The competitive political environment is more likely to affect women negatively than men. Aggression and competition associated with politics can dampen women's political ambition. For example, women are turned off of political careers because of their perceptions about what it means to be a politician (Schneider et al. 2016, 515-523).

Men and women differ in their perceptions about their qualifications (Fox and Lawless 2014, 398-401). The encouragement to contest for office by a political figure is considered the most crucial factor in considering candidacy. Thus, such encouragement is crucial for augmenting the quantity of women in the applicant (Fox and Lawless 2010, 310-313). Parties are very active in candidate recruitment. The role of political parties is quite clear: without more women being recruited to contest a party nomination, voters will not have the opportunity to cast their ballot for a woman in the general election, and as a result the underrepresentation of women will continue. Therefore, it is not surprising that political recruitment at the candidate selection stage has become a focal point for scholars (Cross and Young 2013, 24-28).

Women and men have distinct reasons for running for office in numerous respects. A research focusing on individual-level issues, emphasizing innate disparities in political ambition by gender. Some research documents that women are more likely than men to "lack the key ingredients" (e.g., self-perceived qualifications, political interest, family socialization, and having run for office while in school) that foster the initial consideration to run for office (Fox and Lawless 2014, 499-503). Even where women provide strong, positive assessments of their own competence and qualifications, they are less likely than men to express political ambition (Sidorsky 2015, 802-806) perhaps because women are more averse to elections (Kanthak and Woon 2015, 595-598) or because of the lack of female role models in political office (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006, 233-236).

Another strand of political ambition research models candidate emergence within a rational choice framework: a cost-benefit calculation in which potential candidates weigh both the probability and benefits of obtaining office against the costs of campaigning (Black 1972, 144-152). Women face greater costs of running for office along a variety of dimensions. Thus, even if women were just as predisposed to be political ambitious as men, many studies on gender and politics have found that there are structural obstacles that women face that men do not in pursuing political office (Lawless and Fox 2005, 55).

Society socializes women in such a way that they do not consider themselves viable political candidates. One source of this is their upbringing: Women, compared to men, report that they engage less in political discussions as children and were less likely to discuss politics with their fathers (Lawless and Fox 2005, 70). Lawless and Fox argue that this

contributes to a pattern of socialization that communicates to women that politics is a “man's game.” Moreover, as adults, women are less likely to experience encouragement to run for office by their family and friends. The absence of personal support and encouragement is highly consequential to women's potential candidacies. Receiving encouragement to run for office greatly increases an individual's likelihood of running for office (about 45 percentage points); this means that the absence of such support significantly depresses the likelihood of women running for office (Lawless and Fox 2005, 70). These two important factors—the absence of political engagement in childhood and the lower levels of personal support in adulthood—contribute to women's reticence to consider themselves as candidates.

The story of women's underrepresentation in political office is a story of reluctance. Women do not win because women do not run, and women do not run because they have a confidence gap, which leads them to doubt their qualifications for office (Carroll 1994, 124). The “confidence gap” perspective that is currently dominant in the gender and politics literature suggests that women tend to be reluctant to run for office because they are less confident about their qualifications for office holding than their male counterparts (Frederick 2013, 113-116). The low level of women representation is due to the fact that very few women contest election and the few women who decide to contest encounter difficulties in the recruitment phase (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2015, 748-753), in the selection phase (Gauja and Cross 2015, 287-298), and in the election phase (Kjaer and Krook 2019, 444-455). These barriers create uneven playing fields, reinforcing the perception that women lack sufficient ambition, when in fact, structural constraints are at play throughout the political recruitment process (Wauters et al. 2025, 262-278).

Conclusion

Given the persistent and widespread nature of women's underrepresentation, question of political ambition is becoming increasingly important. This should be of concern for scholars of political participation and gender for many reasons. Given that representative democracy requires individuals to come forward and seek political candidacy, low levels of political ambition among women is problematic. Political ambition is the first step toward a political mandate. Low levels of political ambition among women may negatively affect women's recruitment, selection and eventual election.

Research has identified various internal and external factors that affect political ambition. They cannot be understood in isolation because they are part of the comprehensive reality women face when they decide to participate in politics. Women's political ambition can indeed be caused by various factors, including structural characteristics such as the political culture, gendered political socialization and the rules of the political game, which may make women retain

from engaging in politics (Piscopo 2019, 817-824), individual factors may play a role, such as the evaluation of one's own capacities, personal economic circumstances, personality traits or perceptions about politics.

Notes and References

- Akirav, Osnat. 2025. "The Narrative of Women's Political Ambition." *Israel Affairs* 31 (1): 81–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2025.2444052>.
- Allen, Peter, and David Cutts. 2020. "Personality and the Gender Gap in Political Ambition." *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 3 (1): 11–35. <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510819X15728541544002>.
- Atkeson, Lonna Rae. 2003. "Not All Cues Are Created Equal: The Conditional Impact of Female Candidates on Political Engagement." *Journal of Politics* 65 (4): 1040–61.
- Bernhard, Rachel, Shauna Shames, and Dawn Langan Teele. 2021. "To Emerge? Breadwinning, Motherhood, and Women's Decisions to Run for Office." *American Political Science Review* 115 (2): 379–94. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000970>.
- Bjarnegård, Elin, and Meryl Kenny. 2015. "Revealing the 'Secret Garden': The Informal Dimensions of Political Recruitment." *Politics & Gender* 11 (4): 748–53. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X15000471>.
- Black, Gordon S. 1972. "A Theory of Political Ambition: Career Choices and the Role of Structural Incentives." *American Political Science Review* 66 (1): 144–59. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1959283>.
- Campbell, David E., and Christina Wolbrecht. 2006. "See Jane Run: Women Politicians as Role Models for Adolescents." *Journal of Politics* 68 (2): 233–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2006.00402.x>.
- Carroll, Susan J. 1994. *Women as Candidates in American Politics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 124
- Chattopadhyay, Raghabendra, and Esther Duflo. 2001. "Women's Leadership and Policy Decisions: Evidence from a Nationwide Randomized Experiment in India." Boston University, Institute for Economic Development: 1409-1443. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0262.2004.00539.x>.

Coffé, Hilde, Robin Devroe, Audrey Vandeleene, and Bram Wauters. 2022. "Preferences for and Perceptions About Politicians' Goals and How They Impact Women's and Men's Political Ambition." *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 5 (2): 191–210. <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510821X16423796696763>.

Collignon, Sofia. 2024. "Addressing Barriers to Women's Representation in Party Candidate Selections." *Political Quarterly* 95 (2): 363–67. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13397>.

Cross, William, and Lisa Young. 2013. "Candidate Recruitment in Canada: The Role of Political Parties." In *Parties, Elections, and the Future of Canadian Politics*, edited by R. Koop and A. Bittner, 24–45. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Crowder-Meyer, Melody. 2013. "Gendered Recruitment Without Trying: How Local Party Recruiters Affect Women's Representation." *Politics & Gender* 9 (4): 390–413. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X13000391>.

Dahl, Malte, and Jacob Nystrup. 2021. "Confident and Cautious Candidates: Explaining Under-Representation of Women in Danish Municipal Politics." *European Journal of Political Research* 60 (1): 199–224. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12396>.

Fox, Richard L., and Jennifer L. Lawless. 2005. "To Run or Not to Run for Office: Explaining Nascent Political Ambition." *American Journal of Political Science* 49 (3): 642–59. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2005.00147.x>.

Fox, Richard L., and Jennifer L. Lawless. 2010. "If Only They'd Ask: Gender, Recruitment, and Political Ambition." *Journal of Politics* 72 (2): 310–26. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S00223816109990752>.

Fox, Richard L., and Jennifer L. Lawless. 2014a. "Reconciling Family Roles with Political Ambition: The New Normal for Women in Twenty-First Century U.S. Politics." *Journal of Politics* 76 (2): 398–414. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381613001473>.

Fox, Richard L., and Jennifer L. Lawless. 2014b. "Uncovering the Origins of the Gender Gap in Political Ambition." *American Political Science Review* 108 (3): 499–519. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055414000227>.

Frederick, Angela. 2013. "Bringing Narrative In: Race–Gender Storytelling, Political Ambition, and Women's Paths to Public Office." *Women, Politics & Policy* 34 (2): 113–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1554477X.2013.776379>.

- Fridkin, Kim L., and Patrick J. Kenney. 2014. "How the Gender of U.S. Senators Influences People's Understanding and Engagement in Politics." *Journal of Politics* 68 (4): 1017–31.
- Gauja, Anika, and William Cross. 2015. "The Influence of Party Candidate Selection Methods on Candidate Diversity." *Representation* 51 (3): 287–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2015.1108359>.
- Goswami, Indrajit, S. Balakrishnan, C. Vinotha, Reena Chopra, V. Sivakumar, and Chetan D. M. 2023. "Gender and Politics: Examining Women's Representation and Empowerment." *Journal of Namibian Studies: History Politics Culture* 33 (3): 1980–1994. <https://doi.org/10.59670/jns.v33i.2302>.
- Hansen, Susan B. 1997. "Talking About Politics: Gender and Contextual Effect on Political Proselytizing." *Journal of Politics* 59 (1): 73–103.
- Inter-Parliamentary Union. 1999. *Women in Parliament: 1999*. <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/1999-11/women-in-parliament-1999>
- Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2001. *Women in Parliament: 2001*. <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/2001-11/women-in-parliament-2001>
- In International Parliamentary Union. 2025. *Global Data on National Parliaments*. Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union.
- Kanthak, Kristin, and Jonathan Woon. 2015. "Women Don't Run? Election Aversion and Candidate Entry in Legislatures in the United States." *American Journal of Political Science* 59 (3): 595–612. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12158>.
- Karp, Jeffrey A., and Susan A. Banducci. 2008. "When Politics Is Not Just a Man's Game: Women's Representation and Political Engagement." *Electoral Studies* 27 (1): 105–15.
- Kjaer, Ulrik, and Karina Kosiara-Pedersen. 2019. "The Hourglass Pattern of Women's Representation." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 29 (3): 299–317.
- Kjaer, Ulrik, and Mona Lena Krook. 2019. "The Blame Game: Analyzing Gender Bias in Danish Local Elections." *Politics, Groups & Identities* 7 (2): 444–55.

Lawless, Jennifer L., and Richard L. Fox. 2005. *It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lawless, Jennifer L., Richard L. Fox, and Gail Baitinger. 2014. "Women's Underrepresentation in U.S. Politics: The Enduring Gender Gap in Political Ambition." In *Women and Elective Office: Past, Present, and Future*, edited by Sue Thomas and Clyde Wilcox, 27–45. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mansbridge, Jane. 1999. "Should Blacks Represent Blacks and Women Represent Women? A Contingent 'Yes'." *Journal of Politics* 61 (3): 628–57. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2647821>.

Mo, Cecilia Hyunjung, Katharine M. Conn, and Georgia Anderson-Nilsson. 2019. "Youth National Service and Women's Political Ambition: The Case of Teach For America." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 7 (4): 864–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2019.1630288>.

Niven, David, Ashley Straka, and Amina Mhajne. 2020. "Who Reveals, Who Conceals? Candidate Gender and Policy Transparency." *Political Research Quarterly* 73 (2): 396–408. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912919833180>.

Pate, Jennifer, and Richard Fox. 2018. "Getting Past the Gender Gap in Political Ambition." *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 156: 166–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2018.10.002>.

Piscopo, Jennifer M. 2019. "The Limits of Leaning In: Ambition, Recruitment, and Candidate Training in Comparative Perspective." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 7 (4): 817–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2018.1532917>.

Preece, Jessica Robinson, Olga Bogach Stoddard, and Rachel Fisher. 2016. "Run, Jane, Run! Gendered Responses to Political Party Recruitment." *Political Behavior* 38 (3): 561–77. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-015-9327-3>.

Sawer, Marian. 2002. "The Representation of Women in Australia: Meaning and Make-Believe." *Parliamentary Affairs* 55 (1): 5–18.

Schneider, Monica C., Mirya R. Holman, Amanda B. Diekman, and Thomas McAndrew. 2016. "Power, Conflict, and Community: How Gendered Views of Political Power Influence Women's Political Ambition." *Political Psychology* 37 (4): 515–31. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12268>.

Sidorsky, Kaitlin. 2015. "Moving on Up? The Gendered Ambitions of State-Level Appointed Officials." *Political Research Quarterly* 68 (4): 802–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912915607638>.

Tremblay, Manon. 2007. "Democracy, Representation, and Women: A Comparative Analysis." *Democratization* 14 (4): 533–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340701398261>.

Wauters, Bram, Robin Devroe, Audrey Vandeleene, and Hilde Coffé. 2025. "Beyond Elections: Unpacking the Gender Gap in Political Ambition Across Political Roles." *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 46 (3): 262–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1554477X.2025.2507952>.

Wolbrecht, Christina, and David E. Campbell. 2017. "Role Models Revisited: Youth, Novelty, and the Impact of Female Candidates." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 5 (3): 418–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2016.1268179>.

Moamenla Amer

Department of Political Science

Nagaland University, Lumami

Yashikala Jamir Ao

Department of Political Science

Nagaland University, Lumami