Women are not well represented in politics. Simply turning on the television to a summit of world leaders, a debate in the British Parliament, or a United Nations Security Council meeting reveals a dearth of female faces. Women make up half of the population of every country in the world. But the worldwide average percentage of women in national parliaments is only 16%. Of the more than 190 countries in the world, a woman is the head of government (president or a prime minister) in only 7. Women are 9% of ambassadors to the United Nations, 7% of the world’s cabinet ministers, and 8% of world mayors.

At the turn of the 21st century, there is little overt discrimination against women in politics. Almost every country in the world provides the legal right for women to participate in politics. Women can vote, women can support candidates, and women can run for office. But the lack of visible women in the political life of nation after nation suggests that veiled discrimination against women remains. In some countries, such as Sweden, Argentina, and Rwanda, women have made remarkable progress in their political representation. Unfortunately, in many other countries, the struggle for equal representation proceeds slowly. And some populations, religions, and governments remain openly hostile to the notion of women in politics.

In no country do women make up 50% of the national legislature. But a few countries do come close. For years, Sweden reigned as the country with the highest percentage of women in its parliament. In 2003, however, Sweden
was dethroned by Rwanda, which reached 48.8% women in its legislature. The two countries could not be more different. Sweden is a developed Western nation, has been at peace for almost two centuries, and governs through a parliament first established more than 500 years ago (Kelber 1994). In Sweden, women’s increasing participation in politics was a long, slow process. Beginning with reforms in the 1920s, Sweden broke the 10% mark for women’s legislative representation in 1952, boasted the first female acting prime minister in 1958, and then passed the 20% mark for female legislative presence in 1973 and the 30% mark in 1985.

In contrast, in 2003, Rwanda had just begun to recover from a brutal genocide during which more than a million people lost their lives. Rwanda is a poor nation in Africa that ranks 159th out of 177 countries in its level of “human development” (United Nations 2004). The 2003 election was the inaugural election of a new constitution, which guaranteed women at least 30% of the National Assembly seats. Before that time, women had been less of a presence, never hitting 20% of the parliament before the transition to an interim government in 1994. But even with a guaranteed 30%, voters chose even more women—almost 20% more. The promotion of women by international organizations, the influence of local women’s organizations, and the sheer number of men killed during or imprisoned after the genocide help explain the sudden rise of women to substantial political power (Longman 2006).

That Rwanda and Sweden rank first and second in women’s legislative presence suggests that one cannot assume that women do better in Western, industrialized nations. Indeed, there is substantial variation across regions of the world, and many highly developed Western countries fall far behind.
developing countries in their representation of women as political leaders. For example, as of June 2005, the United States ranked 61st of 185 countries in percentage of women, falling behind Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ecuador, and Zimbabwe. Britain ranks 52nd and is behind Mexico, Namibia, and Vietnam. Spain, Italy, and the United States have never had a female president, whereas Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Indonesia have. It is also important to recognize that Sweden and Rwanda are two of only a handful of true success stories for women’s presence in politics. Of all countries, 73% have less than 20% women in their national legislatures. And 10 countries have no women representatives at all.

The story of women, politics, and power is therefore different than that of women in education or women in the labor force. Although women have made remarkable inroads into both higher education and traditionally male occupations, the political sphere remains an arena where women have far to go. Altogether, when we talk about women and politics, women remain just a “blip on the male political landscape” (Reynolds 1999:547).

Arguments for Women’s Representation in Politics

Why should we care about a lack of women in politics? First, politics is an important arena for decision making. Individuals who hold official positions in government get to decide how to allocate scarce resources, such as tax revenues. Politicians make political decisions that may help some people at the expense of others. Decisions by politicians even affect people’s individual choices by encouraging some behaviors and outlawing others. Second, political power is a valuable good. Politicians hold power over other social institutions, such as the family or education, and are able to codify particular practices into law (Martin 2004). Politicians have the power to enforce their decisions, sometimes with force. Third, holding a political position is to hold a position of authority. Looking at the makeup of political figures in a country highlights who is legitimated to make societywide decisions in that society.

But does it matter if all political decision makers are male? In principle, the answer could be no. But in practice the answer is often yes. In principle, most laws are gender neutral, and elected representatives pay attention to all of their constituents equally. In practice, however, feminist political theorists have argued that the appearance of neutrality toward gender or equality between men and women in government actually hides substantial gender inequality. If gender-neutral language is used in principle, but in practice only men appear in politics, then women are not equal but rather invisible. Theorists such as Anne Phillips, Carol Pateman, and Iris Young
have shown that abstract terms used in political theory, such as individual or citizen, though having the appearance of being gender neutral, actually signify White males (Pateman 1988, 1989; Phillips 1991, 1995; Young 1990). Even more forceful arguments say that the state was structured from its inception to benefit men and that it has a continuing interest in the maintenance of male domination, both in Western countries (Lerner 1986; MacKinnon 1989) and in non-Western countries (Charrad 2001).

Without women, the state, being populated only by men, could legislate in the male interest. That is, if women are not around when decisions are made, their interests may not be served. Golda Meir was an Israeli cabinet minister before she became prime minister of Israel. She related the following story: “Once in the Cabinet we had to deal with the fact that there had been an outbreak of assaults on women at night. One minister (a member of an extreme religious party) suggested a curfew. Women should stay at home after dark. I said: ‘but it’s the men attacking the women. If there’s to be a curfew, let the men stay at home, not the women.’” Golda Meir’s presence on the cabinet allowed her to point out the unfairness of making women stay home rather than men. If she had not been there, who would have pointed this out?

In general, male lawmakers are less likely to initiate and pass laws that serve women’s and children’s interests (Berkman and O’Connor 1993; Bratton and Haynie 1999; Childs and Withey 2004; Schwindt-Bayer 2006; Swers 1998; Taylor-Robinson and Heath 2003; Thomas 1991). They less often think about rape, domestic violence, women’s health, and child care. But in democracies, the points of view of all groups need to be taken into account. Therefore, the views and opinions of women as well as men must be incorporated into political decision making.

These arguments are interesting in theory, but what about in practice? What might it mean to women around the world to be underrepresented in politics?

**Case Study: The Story of Mukhtaran Bibi—Village Council Justice**

In June 2002, in Meerwala, a remote village in Pakistan, Mukhtaran Bibi’s 12-year-old brother was accused of having an affair with a woman of a higher caste. The village council ruled that her brother had committed a crime and sentenced Mukhtaran Bibi to be gang-raped by four men as punishment. The four men stripped her naked and took turns raping her. She then had to walk home almost naked in front of several hundred people.

The expectation was that now Mukhtaran Bibi would commit suicide. Indeed, because they are now considered deeply dishonored and
stigmatized, this is the typical path taken by the hundreds of Pakistani girls gang-raped every year due to family or tribal rivalries. Instead, Ms. Mukhtaran defied tradition by testifying against her attackers, resulting in six convictions. Government investigators now say that the accusation against her brother was false. Instead, members of the higher caste tribe actually sexually abused Mukhtaran Bibi’s brother and tried to cover it up by falsely accusing him of the affair.

Mukhtaran Bibi’s story has a mostly happy ending. She received compensation money from Pakistani President Perrez Musharraf and used it to start two schools in her village, one for boys and the other for girls. When the government detained her for planning to visit the United States in June 2005, international attention and outcry forced her release. Her round-the-clock guards provided by the government afford her some protection from her attackers, who were released after their convictions were overturned in March 2005.

The stories of many other young girls in Pakistan do not have such happy endings. They are beaten for not producing sons, raped, disfigured for trying to choose a husband for themselves, or killed as a matter of family honor. In a society that does not acknowledge rape in marriage, approximately 50% of women who do report a rape are jailed under the 1979 Hudood Ordinances. These Ordinances allow courts to view a woman’s charge of rape as an admission of illegal sex unless she can prove that the intercourse was nonconsensual. Such proof requires multiple male witnesses to the crime, as in some circumstances the testimony of a woman is worth only half that of a man.


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Case Study: Wife Beating in Nigeria—Legal Under the Penal Code

In December 2001, Rosalynn Isimeto-Osibuamhe of Lagos, Nigeria, wanted to visit her parents. Her husband, Emmanuel, told her she had to stay home. Their argument ended when Emmanuel beat Rosalynn unconscious and left her lying in the street outside their apartment. This was hardly the first time she’d been beaten. During the course of their 4-year marriage, Emmanuel beat her more than 60 times.

This story is not an unusual one in Africa, where domestic violence is endemic. Chronic underreporting, cultural acceptance, and women’s shame make it difficult to provide hard and fast numbers on the extent of wife beating in Africa. But a recent study suggests that one half of Zambian...
women report being physically abused by a male partner. An earlier Nigerian survey explains that 81% of married women reported being verbally or physically abused by husbands. Few African countries have domestic violence laws on the books.

What could Rosalynn Isimeto-Osibuamhe do? Domestic violence is entrenched in Nigerian law. Section 56 of the Nigerian Penal Code allows husbands to use physical means to chastise their wives, as long as the husbands do not inflict grievous harm, where grievous harm is defined as loss of sight, hearing, power of speech, facial disfigurement, or other life-threatening injuries. Nigeria, a country of 350,000 square miles, has only two shelters for battered women. Police do not pursue domestic violence as assault, and Rosalynn’s pastor told her not to make her husband angry and to submit to him. Indeed, many of Isimeto-Osibuamhe’s female neighbors believe that husbands have a right to beat wives who argue, burn dinner, or come home late.

Rosalynn Isimeto-Osibuamhe is unusual in that she was able to leave her husband. She is university educated and the founder of a French school. And she did find a shelter and stayed there for weeks. Still, she is unsure whether she wants a divorce. And many other women in Africa, unable to leave their husbands, are not so lucky.

SOURCES: LaFraniere (2005), Kishor and Johnson (2004), and Odunjinrin (1993).

Case Study: Delaying the Clarence Thomas Vote—Female Representatives Speak Out

For many people in 1991, the television image of 16 White men interrogating Anita Hill during Senate Judiciary Committee hearings epitomized the lack of women’s presence in American politics. But that hearing might not have taken place at all if not for the swift and decisive actions of a small group of female congresswomen.

In the fall of 1991, Clarence Thomas was close to being confirmed as a U.S. Supreme Court justice. But on October 6th, 2 days before the Senate was scheduled to vote on his nomination, a distinguished law professor, Anita Hill, accused Thomas of sexually harassing her in 1981. The story exploded in the media and various groups began calling for a delay on the confirmation vote until the charges of sexual harassment could be fully investigated.

But on Tuesday morning, the 8th of October, it looked like the Senate vote on Thomas would go forward as planned. The men of the Senate (at the time the Senate had 98 men and 2 women) did not plan to investigate the
charges of sexual harassment and appeared ready to confirm Thomas’s nomination to the Supreme Court. This continued a month-long pattern, as Hill had told the Senate Judiciary Committee about her allegations in early September, but the committee had not pursued it. The male senators seemed ready to take Judge Thomas’s word over Professor Hill’s without formal or detailed examination of the evidence.

Because 98% of the Senate was male, congresswomen were concerned that women’s perspectives on sexual harassment were not being fully considered. Therefore, a number of congresswomen decided to take action. They began by speaking on the floor of the House of Representatives, reminding their colleagues that justice required that Hill’s allegations be taken seriously. As argued by Barbara Boxer, “Mr. Speaker, imagine yourself dependent on another human being for your livelihood. Imagine the power that person holds over you. Imagine that person making suggestive comments to you, and beyond that, telling you in detail about pornographic materials he had seen. Would you be intimidated? Yes, especially if you are in your 20s and you are a woman in a man’s field. . . . And, which court is that final protection of women from this kind of harassment? . . . The Supreme Court of the United States of America.”

When procedural rules were used to stop these speeches, the congresswomen decided to go further and take their concerns directly to the Senate. In a march immortalized in photographs, seven congresswomen left Congress and strode over to the Senate side of the Capitol to speak with Senate Democrats during their regular Tuesday caucus meeting. High heels clicking as they advanced up the steps of the Capitol, these elected representatives were determined to emphasize that the women’s point of view might be very different from the view of these male senators. To them, these charges were serious and worthy of genuine consideration.

The congresswomen were turned away from the closed-door caucus meeting, despite repeated pleas to be allowed in. The Senate majority leader ultimately agreed to meet with the women separately, and they stated their case. That night, facing mounting public pressure, he announced that a confirmation vote on Thomas would be delayed so hearings on Anita Hill’s charges could be held.

Thus, seven elected female representatives, Patricia Schroeder of Colorado, Barbara Boxer of California, Louise Slaughter of New York, Jolene Unsold of Washington, Patsy Mink of Hawaii, Nita Lowey of Massachusetts, and Eleanor Holmes-Norton of the District of Columbia, played a critical role in helping America and the Senate understand that women’s concerns were important in the halls of power.

This story also has a mostly happy ending. Although many felt that the Anita Hill hearings were ultimately a farce, public resentment of that farce helped to send Barbara Boxer, one of the marchers, and three other women...
to the Senate the following year—a Senate that would not have a women's bathroom until 1993. The Anita Hill hearings also helped increase awareness of sexual harassment of women in the workplace, which was only incorporated into the guidelines set by the Equal Opportunity Commission (the body responsible for adjudicating sexual harassment claims) in 1980.


Ultimately, all of these situations lead to the question, if a government chronically underrepresents women, are we positive the rules of the game are fair? The same question can be asked about any historically marginalized or oppressed group—for example, a racial or ethnic group. Indeed, it is difficult to separate the stories of oppressed women in this chapter from their racial and ethnic status. For our purposes here, we generally focus on women alone, while acknowledging that race, class, and gender are intertwined in the lives of women around the world.

Justice Arguments for Women's Representation

Women make up half of the population of every country in the world. A simple justice argument would therefore suggest that women and men should be equally represented in politics. But what does equal representation mean? Arguments for women’s equal representation in politics fall into one of three types—each type with a different conception of representation. These types are formal, descriptive, and substantive representation.

The earliest and most basic formulation of equal representation is formal representation, meaning that women have the legal right to participate in politics on an equal basis with men. Formal representation requires that any barriers to women’s participation in decision making be removed. Women must have the right to vote and the right to stand for office. Discrimination against women in the arena of politics must be eradicated. Men and women must be equal before the law. In short, women must have the same opportunity as men to participate in politics.

This may sound straightforward to people who have voted their whole life, but the fight for the formal representation of women in politics was long, difficult, and occasionally bloody. In the early part of the 20th century, as women fought for the right to vote, it was not always clear that they would get it. Furthermore, this struggle continues into the present: Multiple votes were taken before women got the vote in Kuwait in 2005, proof of education is required for a woman to vote in Lebanon, and women still cannot vote in Saudi Arabia.
Kuwait, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia are anomalies in the present day. The idea that women require formal representation in politics has become nearly universally accepted over the last 100 years. Women’s political rights are now seen as human rights, and statements about women’s political participation are set out in the resolutions, codes, and formal conventions of most international bodies as well as in the law of many individual countries. The United Nations (UN; 1946) adopted the first of a number of resolutions dealing with women’s political rights in 1946 when, during its first session, the UN General Assembly recommended that all member states fulfill the aims of its charter “granting to women the same political rights as men” (resolution 56 (I)). At the time, only about 50% of UN member states allowed women the vote.

Today, women can formally participate in politics almost everywhere, and resolution statements are much stronger, taking for granted the notion that women can and should participate. For example, at the fourth UN World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, 189 countries agreed to a platform for action stating, “No government can claim to be democratic until women are guaranteed the right to equal representation” (United Nations 1995). Ultimately, these arguments for formal representation are about equal opportunity for women. The goal of formal representation is the absence of direct and overt discrimination against women in politics.

But observation suggests that formal representation does not necessarily result in substantial numbers of women in positions of political power. Even though most countries of the world grant women the equal opportunity to vote and to participate in politics, women remain substantially underrepresented in positions of political decision making. More than 98% of countries in the world have granted women the formal right to vote and the formal right to stand for election. But as noted earlier, few countries have more than 20% women in their legislative bodies. Equal opportunity through formal representation does not appear to automatically produce large numbers of women in politics.

For this reason, in the last decades of the 20th century, feminist political theorists began to argue that a different conception of equal representation was needed. Equal representation can also require descriptive representation—that there must be descriptive similarity between representatives and constituents. If women make up 50% of the population, they should also make up roughly 50% of legislative and executive bodies.

Arguments for descriptive representation suggest that it is not enough to have formal political equality in politics. This is because simply extending the legal right to pursue public office to women does not ensure that they will. Rights alone do not remedy the substantial social and economic
inequalities that prevent women from taking advantage of their political opportunities. Instead, their past and continued exclusion from elites reinforces the idea of women’s inferiority in the political arena (Phillips 1995).

Advocates of descriptive representation therefore view formal political equality as only the first step in achieving equal representation for women. In principle, laws can ensure that women have an equal opportunity to vote and to pursue political careers. In practice, however, women may not come to the starting line with the same resources or skills as men, and this can result in differences in outcomes, even without differences in opportunity.

In discussing the limits of equal opportunity, an analogy to a foot race is often used. Perhaps the most famous example is President Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 speech to the graduating class of Howard University: “You do not take a man who for years has been hobbled by chains, liberate him, bring him to the starting line of a race, saying, ‘you are free to compete with all the others,’ and still justly believe you have been completely fair.” It is easy to substitute woman for man in this speech and understand the critique of simple formal representation. The present effects of past discrimination can prevent laws ensuring equal opportunity from translating into equal outcomes.

Instead, something more is required: “Those who have been traditionally subordinated, marginalized, or silenced need the security of a guaranteed voice and . . . democracies must act to redress the imbalance that centuries of oppression have wrought” (Phillips 1991:7). Further action must be taken—electoral laws changed, gender quotas introduced—to ensure that women are represented in politics in numbers more proportionately similar to their presence in the population.

Arguments for descriptive representation hinge on the notion that racial, ethnic, and gender groups are uniquely suited to represent themselves in democracies. Social groups have different interests due to varied economic circumstances, histories of oppression, and cultural or ideological barriers they continue to face. In principle, democratic ideals suggest that elected representatives will serve the interests of the entire community and be able to transcend any specific interests based on their own characteristics, such as sex, race, or age. But in practice, “while we may all be capable of that imaginative leap that takes us beyond our own situation, history indicates that we do this very partially, if at all” (Phillips 1991:65). Although elections make representatives accountable to their constituents, they are sporadic enough to allow representatives to pursue private preferences or party loyalties.

If groups cannot be well represented by other groups, they need to be represented themselves among political elites (Williams 1998). In the case of women, the argument is that due to different socialization and life experiences, women are different from men. Thus, “women bring to politics a
different set of values, experiences and expertise” (Phillips 1995:6). Women have different interests than men do, and those interests cannot be represented by men; therefore, women must be present themselves in the political arena. When asked why there should be more women in politics, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the world’s first female prime minister, replied “because they are not considered. Women’s problems are not considered now . . . women have to work very hard, not necessarily at a desk in an office . . . they have . . . family problems that are different than what the men have” (Liswood 1995:109).

Arguments for descriptive representation are not essentialist (Phillips 1995:55–6; Williams 1998:5–6). They do not assume that, by definition, all women share an essential identity with the same interests and concerns. Instead, these feminist writers make it clear that women have a common interest because of their social position. Because of women’s historically marginalized position, their general relegation to certain economic roles, and their primary responsibility for child and elder care, women have shared experiences and therefore common interests. And because women can best represent themselves, the argument continues, they need to be numerically represented in politics, not simply formally represented. Descriptive representation requires that women have a legislative presence (Williams 1998).

Arguments for descriptive representation are becoming more common in international statements on women’s political position. For example, the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action states, “Women’s equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women’s interests to be taken into account” (United Nations 1995, paragraph 181). This statement suggests that equal participation, or representation, must go beyond simple justice and move toward the incorporation of women’s interests.

Even if we accept that women have different interests than men do and therefore cannot be represented by men, a question remains: Can women represent women? This question leads to a third type of equal representation: substantive representation, which means that women’s interests must be advocated in the political arena. Substantive representation requires that politicians speak for and act to support women’s issues.

Going even further than the numerical representation of women outlined in descriptive representation arguments, advocates of substantive representation point out that standing for is not the same as acting for (Pitkin 1972). Getting higher numbers of women involved in politics is only a necessary but not sufficient condition for women’s interests to be served. Instead, for women’s interests to be represented in politics, female politicians have to be willing to and able to represent those interests.
But what does it mean to represent women’s interests, needs, or concerns? There are a variety of answers to that question:

- Female politicians could state that they view women as a distinct part of their constituencies or that they feel a special responsibility to women (Childs 2002; Reingold 1992).

- Female politicians could draft or support legislation that directly attempts to promote social, educational, or economic equity for women. Examples include the U.S. 1963 Equal Pay Act, which worked to end the pay differential between men and women and Mozambique’s 2003 New Family Law that allows wives to work without the permission of their husband (Disney 2006).

- Female politicians could prioritize, support, or vote for “women’s issues”—issues of particular interest and concern to women. These issues may be directly related to women—for example, Namibia’s 2003 Combating of Domestic Violence Act, which supports victims of domestic violence and aids the prosecution of crimes against women (Bauer 2006). Or women’s issues may be indirectly related to women through their greater responsibility for child and elder care. Examples include the U.S. Family and Medical Leave Act, which mandates that employers allow employees up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave to care for a newborn child or a sick immediate family member, such as a parent, or to recuperate from a serious illness.

- Female politicians may also prioritize, support, or vote for policies of particular interest to feminists, such as abortion or contraception (Molyneux 1985b; Tremblay and Pelletier 2000). For example, a female politician in South Africa may have supported the 1996 Choice on the Termination of Pregnancy Act, which allows abortion for all women on demand (Britton 2006).

Talking about substantive representation raises three distinct issues. First, female politicians may not have the desire to act “for women.” Second, even if they want to, female politicians may not be able to act “for women.” Finally, female politicians of a particular race, ethnicity, class, or caste may not desire to or be able to act “for all women.”

To begin, women who reach positions of political power may not have any desire to act for women in one or all of the ways described earlier. Women vary in their interest in advancing equality for women or in their commitment to feminist concerns, such as access to abortion. Not all women feel moved to devote special attention to the interests of women,
children, and families. For example, Margaret Thatcher, prime minister of Britain from 1979 to 1990, was famously antifeminist and pursued policies that many deemed detrimental to the women and children of England and Scotland.

Even if they want to act in the interests of women, female politicians may not be able to. Simply being a politician does not mean that one’s interests can be effectively pursued. There are a number of reasons why female politicians may be unable to initiate or support legislation related to women’s interests. First, as Joni Lovenduski (1993) warns, institutions may change women before women can change institutions. Female legislators are embedded in political institutions where male behavior—for example, forcefulness, detachment, and impersonality—is considered the norm. Thus, women may need to change or adapt to conform to those norms. Consider what a female legislator from Southern Europe has to say: “politics may change women because, in order to survive politically, women may copy the men in their methods and behavior” (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2000:23).

Even if women do not change their behavior, they may be sanctioned if they act in the interests of women. Relating the experience of members of parliament (MPs) from the Labour Party in Great Britain, Childs (2002) explains:

The most common perception is that women who seek to act for women act only for women. This results in a tension between a woman MP’s parliamentary career and acting for women. If an MP desires promotion, she cannot afford to be regarded as acting for women too often or too forcefully. (p. 151, emphasis added)

If women act for women, they may be relegated to “female” committees such as health or social services. A desire to break out of these roles and gain more prestigious “masculine” committee assignments can lead to the disavowal of gender (“I’m a politician not a woman”) (Sawer 2000:374).

Finally, as members of political parties, female politicians are beholden to party stances on various issues. Indeed, for many issues relevant to women, party differences may be greater than differences between men and women. Many studies of male and female legislators have demonstrated that women tend toward the political left, prioritize women’s issues more highly, and espouse feminist ideals more often than men. But much of the difference between men and women disappears if political party is taken into account. So, for example, women may tend to support women’s issues, such as public funding for day care or equality between the sexes, more than the men of their own party. However, the men of left parties may espouse more support for such issues than the women of parties on the

Still, having more women in politics unquestionably makes the government more receptive to the interests of most women. Advocates of substantive representation therefore argue that not only must the numbers of women in politics increase but those women must also receive support when they attempt to act for women’s interests. For example, women’s caucuses can help achieve substantive representation by supporting women and providing them with resources. As an example, the bipartisan U.S. Congressional Caucus for Women’s Issues adopts legislative priorities, plans strategies to move women’s issues forward, and links like-minded congressional members to each other and to outside groups. Some advocates of substantive representation argue that rather than simply electing women to political office voters should elect feminists, either women or men, who are more likely to be directly supportive of women’s interests (Tremblay and Pelletier 2000).

But can female politicians represent all women? Women are not just women—they are women of a particular race, ethnicity, religion, class, sexual orientation, or linguistic group. Although women’s unique relationship to reproduction and the family cuts across all other social categories, women are not a monolithic group. The interests of a woman from a lower class may be different from those of a woman from an upper class. The problem arises when the women who attain political power are of only certain classes, races, or ethnicities—when they are elite women. For example, all 18 women currently serving in the Israeli Knesset are Jewish (not Arab) (A. Ben-Arieh, personal communication, December 21, 2005). Therefore, it is vital to ask whether these female politicians can represent all women, or whether they can represent only rich, or White, or Western interests. We return to this critical issue at the end of this chapter.

Utility Arguments for Women’s Representation

Arguments for why women should be represented in politics are not restricted to justice arguments. Other arguments focus on the utility, or usefulness, of having women represented in politics. These arguments can be divided into two types: the argument that increasing women’s participation improves the quality of representation and deliberation and the argument that visible women in politics act as role models for younger women.

Including women in politics can increase the quality of political decision making. When women are included among potential politicians, it doubles the pool of talent and ability from which leaders can be drawn. When women are not included, valuable human resources are wasted (Norderval
Without women’s full participation in politics, political decision making will be of lower quality than it could be or should be.

The quality of political decision making should also increase with greater inclusion of women because including women increases the overall diversity of ideas, values, priorities, and political styles. Introducing women to the political realm should introduce new ideas because women have different interests. In his philosophical work, John Stuart Mill (1859, 1861) argued that allowing diverse and competing views in the marketplace of ideas helps societies determine what is true and what is not true. If certain ideas are not allowed in the marketplace, then they cannot be proven right and used to change policy, or proven wrong and used to bolster existing ideas.

Diversity is certainly good in and of itself, but it should also make political decision making more flexible and capable of change. The analogy here is to diversity of species in ecological niches. Biologists know that ecological niches dominated by a single species are more vulnerable to changes in the environment than niches with a diversity of species. In a similar manner, having only the ideas and perspectives of men represented in a country’s polity could make a country less flexible to changes in its internal or international environment.

A final utility argument is that female political leaders act as role models for young girls and women. Having a visible presence of women in positions of leadership helps to raise the aspirations of other women (Burrell 1994:173; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Mansbridge 1999; Wolbrecht and Campbell 2005). For example, High-Pippert and Comer (1998) found that women in the United States who were represented by a woman reported more interest in politics than did women who were represented by a man. In Uganda, following the implementation of a law requiring that women make up at least 30% of local councils, women also began participating more in community events (Johnson, Kabuchu, and Vusiya Kayonga 2003). Alternatively, if groups are excluded from politics, this creates the perception that persons in these groups are “not fit to rule” (Mansbridge 1999:649). Without the presence of women in politics, there are no role models to inspire the next generation.

A female legislator from Central Europe puts it well:

Because of cultural differences women often have different experiences and different views on certain issues. That means that as women move into previously male-dominated positions, new perspective and new competence are added. . . . The presence of women in parliament means new skills and different styles in politics. . . . It also brings a new vision, which ultimately leads to revision of laws in order to improve existing ones. Most of all, they [women] serve as role models for future generations. (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2000:41)
But women can hardly affect dominant political values if their numbers are small. If there are only a few women in a country’s national legislature, they will be under pressure to behave like men. With only a few other women for support, any efforts by a woman legislator to raise a “women’s issue” are likely to be denigrated, and the woman who raises them is likely to be marginalized. Some argue that women need to be at least a large minority to have an impact (Kanter 1977). In fact, the United Nations has stated that to make a difference women need to have a critical mass of at least 30% of a legislature.

Consider the view of a female politician from North Africa:

The central committee of the RCD [Democratic Constitutional Rally] has included 21.3 percent women. The change is tangible. In meetings, when a woman speaks in favor of a proposal which concerns women, the applause is louder and more sustained, at least from her female colleagues. They can have a decisive influence during debates and on decisions. A significant percentage can sway a vote. (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2000:68)

We discuss critical mass and the impact of women in greater detail in Chapter 7.

A Brief Overview of Women’s Participation in Politics

Women’s modern-day participation in politics begins with the acquisition of voting rights (suffrage). The first country to fully enfranchise women, and the only country to give women’s suffrage in the 19th century, was New Zealand in 1893. In 1902, Australia was the second country to give women’s suffrage and was followed by a variety of Western and Eastern European states. By 1945, 46% of the world’s countries allowed women to vote. Today, only a single country, Saudi Arabia, allows men to vote but not women. We discuss the fight for women’s suffrage in detail in Chapter 2.

Today, the average percentage of women in national legislatures around the world is 16% (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2005a). There is substantial variation across nations, however. Table 1.1 presents a sample of countries and their world rank in female representation in parliament. As discussed earlier, Rwanda currently has the highest percentage of women in its national legislature, followed by Sweden in the second position. Cuba is tied with Spain at seventh in the world (36%), followed closely by Costa Rica and Mozambique. Iraq, under its new constitution, is ranked 15th in the world in women’s representation with 31.6%. The United Kingdom
and the United States are in the middle of the world rankings, 52nd and 61st, respectively. Toward the bottom, we find Brazil and India, with 8.6% and 8.3% women in their legislatures, and Turkey, ranked 115th with 4.4% women. Kuwait and Micronesia are among the countries tied in 128th position for having no women in their national legislatures.

Table 1.1  World Rankings for Women in Parliament for Select Countries, 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>% Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>48.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>45.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>36.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>36.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>36.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>35.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>34.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>31.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>28.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Namibia</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61</td>
<td>United States</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79</td>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82</td>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89</td>
<td>Russian Federation</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>102</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>115</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>116</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>122</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>128</td>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>128</td>
<td>Micronesia</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The sampling of rankings in Table 1.1 demonstrates that highly ranked countries can come from any region. For example, the top 10 countries come from Africa, Europe, and Latin America. But regional difference in women’s representation, on average, is still a reality. Table 1.2 shows how the percentage of seats held by women in national legislatures (lower and upper houses) varies by region. As would be expected from the rankings, Scandinavia has the highest average rate of female participation, followed by the Americas (which includes the United States) and Europe. Other regions have averages below the worldwide average, for example, Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and countries in the Pacific. The Middle East has the lowest levels of women’s participation of any region.

Currently, 11 countries have no women in their national legislature. Four of these countries are in the Middle East—Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait. It would not be expected that women would be well represented in these countries, as women do not have the vote in Saudi Arabia and only gained the vote in Bahrain in 2002 and Kuwait in May 2005. In the United Arab Emirates, neither men nor women can vote. The other six countries without women in their national legislature are all small Asian-Pacific island nations—the Solomon Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Tonga, and Tuvalu. Of these, Micronesia and Palau have never had women represented in their national legislatures. The others have had women before, up to 8% in Tuvalu.

Women are less well represented as heads of government or in high-level appointed offices, such as cabinet ministers. There are currently seven female heads of government around the world: Helen Clark, prime minister of New Zealand; Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, president of the Philippines; Khaleda Zia, prime minister of Bangladesh; Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, president of Liberia; Angela Merkel, chancellor of Germany; Michelle Bachelet, president of Chile; and Portia Simpson-Miller, prime minister of Jamaica. Unfortunately, in several of these cases, the female leader gained legitimacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Single House or Lower House</th>
<th>Upper House or Senate</th>
<th>Both Houses Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scandinavia</td>
<td>39.9%</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>39.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americas</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Saharan Africa</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab States</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
because a male relative previously held the top position in the country. In those countries, there are few women in the national legislature, suggesting that these are mainly figurehead women. We return to the issue of women in leadership positions, as well as women in parliaments, in Chapter 3.

**Orienting Theories**

Before continuing with our exploration of women in politics around the world, it is important to first introduce a number of key concepts and theories that we use throughout this volume. To understand women in politics, we must understand power, gender, and the interaction between the two.

**Power**

Sociologists often use a classic definition of *power* developed by Max Weber: the ability to impose one’s will on others, even in the face of opposition. Specifically, Weber argued that “‘power’ is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests” (Weber 1978:53). According to this definition, power is a valued resource that cannot be held by all. If one person has power, another does not. Power is overt—applied directly and visibly.

However, theorists do not agree on the proper way to define or conceptualize power, and scholars such as Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, C. Wright Mills, and Talcott Parsons have debated the nature of power for decades. Although we do not discuss the various definitions and debates here, we do suggest that in the field of women in politics, it may be especially important to conceptualize power in a way that accounts for ways of exercising power that are less visible or overt. Thus, we employ a three-fold definition of power developed by Stephen Lukes (1974), who is also especially useful because his work specifically addresses primarily political (rather than economic) components of power. In short, Lukes’s definition includes three dimensions:

- Dimension 1: prevailing in a conflict over overt political preferences
- Dimension 2: preventing the preferences of others from reaching the agenda
- Dimension 3: shaping the preferences of others to match yours

First, Lukes (1974) agrees with Weber that in some cases, power is explicit and direct. But he distinguishes a particular form of direct power
often termed the pluralist view, which follows the work of theorists such as Robert A. Dahl and Nelson Polsby. This first, one-dimensional view of power focuses on actual and observable behavior, decision making, and conflict. We can evaluate the first dimension of political power by looking at the policy preferences, and political participation of legislators or other actors, how they behave, and who prevails (p. 15).

The second dimension of power involves preventing the preferences of others from even reaching the agenda. This dimension is developed partly as a critique of the first dimension’s focus on observable decisions, arguing that, alternatively, power can be exercised by setting limits on the scope of decision making to include only certain issues. According to this perspective, demands for change can sometimes be “suffocated before they are even voiced; or kept covert; or killed before they gain access to the relevant decision-making arena; or, failing all these things, maimed or destroyed in the decision-implementing stage of the policy process” (Bachrach and Baratz 1970:44, cited in Lukes 1974:19). This dimension of power can include a variety of mechanisms for controlling the agenda, including agenda setting, influence, authority, and manipulation.

Finally, Lukes (1974) introduces a third dimension of power that supplements both of the first two dimensions. The third dimension, unlike the first two, recognizes that one person may exercise power over another not only by getting the person to do what he or she does not want to do but also by influencing or shaping what the person even wants. The mechanisms of this process include the control of information, mass media, and socialization. This dimension allows us to recognize that perhaps “the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent conflict from arising in the first place” (p. 23). Lukes acknowledges that this dimension is the hardest to study, but in the case of women’s political power it is especially important to try to understand.

Before we finish our discussion of power, it is important to go beyond Lukes’s dimensions, which compare the power of one actor or group over another, to consider the social structure in which individuals and groups operate. Structural theorists argue that power does not come just from an individual’s or group’s intrinsic qualities but from the roles and social relationships that structure power relations. For example, in schools, the structure of the education system creates an uneven distribution of power between teachers and students who each have a different set of social powers (Isaac 1987, cited in Hayward 2000). Other structural theorists have pointed to the importance of individuals or norms outside of the immediate relationship that contribute to the power of one side (e.g., Wartenberg 1990, 1992). For example, the teacher–student power relation is affected by parents, university admissions officers, and companies who take cues from
the teacher. The teacher’s power is thus reinforced by these other actors. A teacher’s power is also reinforced by social norms—for example, expectations that he or she will be addressed formally, with the title Mr. or Ms. Similarly, when thinking about women in politics, one must think about how women’s power relations are affected by political parties, pressure groups, cultural beliefs, and even global forces.

Addressing gendered power directly, feminist theorists further emphasize the process of personal transformation as a form of power—power within rather than power over. That is, when women, or men, come to better understand themselves and their position in an unequal world, they can be inspired to challenge gender inequality (Kabeer 1994; Rowlands 1997). And feminist theorists stress the ability to work collectively with others as another form of power—power with others to bring about political change (Kabeer 1994; Parpart, Rai, and Staudt 2002). A useful example of the dimensions of power and how they relate to gender appears in Box 1.1.

---

**Box 1.1  Adam, Betsy, and the Cereal Power Struggle**

To further understand the dimensions and structure of power, we discuss this simple example. Suppose there are two siblings named Adam and Betsy. Every week their mother allows them to pick one breakfast cereal at the grocery store that the two will then eat on weekday mornings before going to school. The first week, Adam decides that he wants the frosted O’s, but Betsy really prefers the rice squares. While in the cereal aisle, Adam stands over Betsy and tells her that because he is bigger he should get what he wants. Even though Betsy still wants the rice squares, she agrees, and the family goes home with the frosted O’s. In this example, Adam has one-dimensional power over Betsy.

Before the family’s next trip to the store, however, Adam begins to worry that his sister may put up a fight the next week to get the rice squares. But while eating his frosted O’s the following morning, Adam finds a solution—a coupon on his frosted O’s box for $1 off wheat flakes, chocolate grahams, or frosted O’s. He clips the coupon off of the box and takes it to his mother. When the family goes to the store, the mother sends Adam and Betsy down the cereal aisle with the coupon. Faced with the choice of only three cereals, Betsy cannot get her rice squares, so she again acquiesces to her brother’s will, and the family goes home with the frosted O’s. In this case Adam has exercised two-dimensional power, preventing rice squares from even entering the realm of decision making.

*(Continued)*
Later that day, Adam is very nervous. He looked at the frosted O’s box, and this time there is no coupon. He is sure that after 2 weeks of frosted O’s, Betsy might finally get her way. So Adam devises a plan. Over the next week, while watching television with his sister, every time the commercial for frosted O’s comes on the TV, he proclaims, “Mmmmmm, frosted O’s. Those look soooo good.” And every morning as he walks to school with his sister, he hums the song from the frosted O’s commercial. “Yum, those frosted O’s are good,” he says. Betsy replies, “Hmmm. Let’s get frosted O’s again. They are so good!” In this example, Adam exercised three-dimensional power over his sister Betsy.

Faced with this example, structural theorists would likely argue that it is not just the interaction between Adam and Betsy that is important for understanding power. One must consider their roles within the larger social structure that is their family. For example, as the older brother, Adam may believe that he knows what is best for his sister, and Betsy is used to looking to her older brother for advice and guidance. Thus, the power is not just a function of Adam’s forceful or scheming ways but also is grounded in the older brother–younger sister relationship of Adam and Betsy.

Finally, it is important to consider why this situation did not play out differently. When threatened by her brother the first week at the grocery store, why did Betsy not put up a fight? Why did Betsy not pick up a box of breakfast bars and throw them at Adam, demanding that the family buy the rice squares? To understand this question, we have to consider who Adam and Betsy are and how they were raised. What messages have they received from their parents, their teachers, and the outside environment about how to behave properly? To understand Adam and Betsy, we must talk about gender.

Gender and Gender Stratification

Any discussion of gender usually begins by distinguishing sex and gender. Sex typically refers to biological differences between men and women, whereas gender refers to socially constructed differences between men and women. Why do we prefer to talk about gender instead of sex? Because sex is typically not socially interesting. Gender is. Think about comparing Hillary Clinton, senator from New York since 2000, to a male senator. What difference does it make that Hillary Clinton is a woman? Answering the question by pointing to obvious physiological differences between Senator Clinton and the male senator will not get one very far (D’Amico and Beckman 1995). What interests us is Senator Clinton’s socially constructed
gender: Does her gendered upbringing lead her to have different attitudes than men? Will she adhere to or break out of the roles and behaviors expected of her? What stereotypes will other senators, or the public, bring to bear in evaluating her performance?

So what is gender? To begin, gender is difference. Even though human beings are among the least sexually dimorphous of species, most cultures actively work to distinguish men and women through dress, ornamentation, and exaggeration of physiological differences (Lorber 2003). Similarly, gender character traits are often defined in opposition so that if a particular trait, such as aggressiveness, is attributed to one gender, it is typically determined to be lacking in the other. Men and women are polar opposite sexes. In Western cultures, we often find male–female pairings, such as rational–emotional, aggressive–passive, competitive–cooperative, or assertive–compliant (D’Amico and Beckman 1995:3).

Gender is created. Gender characteristics are cultural creations that get passed on from generation to generation through socialization. From birth, individuals are taught their gender. For example, today in the United States, infant girls are dressed in pink and described as cute or adorable, whereas male infants are dressed in blue and described as big or strong. Children begin to refer to themselves as members of their gender as soon as they learn to speak (Lorber 2003). When moving from infancy to childhood, toddlers are encouraged to move from baby to either big boy or a big girl. Researchers point out that these categories mean different things—in the United States, boys are taught to manipulate their surrounding environment using strength, whereas little girls learn the importance of physical appearance (Cahill 1986; West and Zimmerman 1987). And during playtime in the Philippines, girls enact mother-child scenarios and play house (bahay-babayan) but are cautioned against boys’ games, such as ball games (larong bola) and wandering about (paggala-gala) (Sobritchea 1990). Throughout childhood, parents and other authority figures often interact with children differently based on sex, encouraging appropriate gendered behavior while discouraging transgressive behavior. As Simone de Beauvoir said, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature which is described as feminine” (1952:267 cited in Lorber 2003).

Gender is recreated. We “do gender” by constantly creating and recreating it in our interactions with each other (West and Zimmerman 1987). We behave like a man or a woman, thereby practicing being a man or a woman every day. Thus, gender is not complete when a young person is fully socialized; instead it must be practiced on a daily basis. Grown individuals are not socialized robots. They are active agents who choose to display, perform, and assert their gender in any given interaction (Martin 2004). But choice is
constrained—if someone chooses not to “do” gender appropriately, then he or she will likely be sanctioned (West and Zimmerman 1987:146). The sum of countless individual displays of gender across social interactions creates an overarching gendered social landscape and helps to maintain a conception of gender difference as normal and natural.

But gender is not fixed. Gender varies across countries and over time and even within a single woman’s lifetime. The characteristics or behaviors expected of women in one country may be very different from those expected of women in another (Costa, Terracciano, and McCrae 2001). What it means to be a man or woman has also changed over time (Connell 1987:64). Hansen (1994) demonstrated that in the 19th century men as well as women made quilts and wrote passionate letters to each other. A century ago, women were not meant to participate in politics, whereas today they are presidents and prime ministers. The meaning of gender can even change dramatically within a single person’s lifetime. Over a 50-year period in the United States, men began to take care of children and even stay at home. Women have succeeded in occupations that were considered inappropriate to their nature 75 years ago.

Gender can be hard to notice. Because people are socialized to perform gender since infancy and because they recreate gender on a daily basis, people often take gender for granted (Lorber 2003). Gender is a part of everything people do. But because gender is internalized, people often do not notice its impact on their perceptions or actions. Therefore, gender can be a powerful background identity that colors people’s judgments about one another in very subtle ways (Ridgeway 2001). Because gender is in the background, people may consciously focus on more obvious characteristics of a person’s personality or actions without noticing that, unconsciously, they are bringing gender assumptions into their evaluations. Thinking back to the previous section and our discussion of three-dimensional power, it is important to consider forces that may shape a person’s perceptions, actions, and desires without the person’s knowledge.

Gender is an institution. Like other institutions, gender is a persistent and pervasive social form that orders human activity (Acker 1992; Martin 2004). It is an overarching system of social practices for making men and women different in socially significant ways (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999). A set of social positions is defined by gender and characterized by rules for conduct and procedures for interactions. Gender has a legitimating ideology that constrains and facilitates behavior on the part of individuals. Gender is tightly linked to other institutions, such as the family, the economy, and education. Conceiving of gender as an institution helps to highlight power and the unequal allocation of resources, privilege, and opportunities (Acker 1992; Martin 2004; Risman 2004).
Gender is ranked. Gender is a socially constructed relationship of inequality where the gender categories of male and female are linked to unequal prestige and power (D’Amico and Beckman 1995). The gender differences created and maintained through socialization, everyday performance, and social practice are not neutral but instead create unequal power relationships and ultimately translate into omnipresent gender hierarchy. Gender as rank crosscuts all other social categories—wealthy, powerful women are disadvantaged compared to wealthy, powerful men.

Gender and Power Concepts: Patriarchy, Public Versus Private, and Intersectionality

So far we have discussed how gender is both institutionalized and ranked. The combination of these factors means that, worldwide, women have less power than men do. Women’s lower levels of power and status can be described in many ways, but common terms include gender stratification, gender inequality, female disadvantage, sexism, and patriarchy (Chafetz 1990). Patriarchy is a term used to describe the social system of male domination over females, where male domination is built into the social, political, and economic institutions of society. Patriarchal societies are characterized by male control of economic resources, male domination of political processes and positions of authority, and male entitlement to sexual services. According to the feminist perspective, though some societies are more patriarchal than others, all modern societies have a patriarchal structure.

Women’s power relative to men varies not only across cultures but within societies as well. Specifically, under patriarchy women almost always have more power in the home than in political or economic environments outside of family life. To distinguish between these domains, we use the terms public sphere and private sphere. Throughout history and in many societies in the modern world, it is considered natural or proper for women’s concerns to be in the home, or the private sphere. Women may still lack control over important decisions regarding how resources should be allocated within the home, but the private sphere is generally considered a female domain. According to this perspective, women should be focused on their family and children and making their husbands happy.

One form of this belief, the Cult of True Womanhood, was present in the United States during the 1800s. According to this ideal, women’s proper behavior involved four virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Clearly none of these virtues suggested that women should engage in public political participation or try to run for office. Instead, women were encouraged to assist the church, a task that did not threaten to take women away
from their proper sphere or make women less domestic or submissive. If any woman wanted more than the four virtues, she was thought to be tampering with society, undermining civilization, and unwomanly. For example, early women’s activists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Francis Wright, and Harriet Martineau were considered “semi-women” or “mental hermaphrodites” (Welter 1966).

Although it is clear that women have been oppressed throughout history, some people may think patriarchy is an outdated concept. Over the past few decades, women across a wide range of societies have made remarkable gains in literacy, life expectancy, education, the labor force, and control over reproduction. For instance, in the United States women were once excluded from the most prestigious universities but now often outnumber men. Around the world, professional and managerial classes are now composed of both men and women. And in some countries men are taking on more responsibilities in the home. So do men really still dominate, oppress, and exploit women?

Michael Mann (1986) argues that though gender inequality still exists, patriarchy is an outdated concept. Mann’s reasoning is that patriarchy is fundamentally based on a male-dominated household. And as gender roles have changed over time, public and private boundaries between men and women have dissolved. But feminist theorists have countered that patriarchy is not just about public/private distinctions. The concept of patriarchy posits that there is “systematically structured gender inequality” (Walby 1996:28). And as the household form of patriarchy diminishes, other forms of patriarchy arise (Walby 1996). Although women may now work alongside men, in the United States they still earn 80 cents to every male dollar, and this figure has not changed in 20 years (General Accounting Office 2003). And in relation to the state and policy, politics is not only historically a male institution, but it also continues to be “dominated by men and symbolically interpreted from the standpoint of men in leading positions” (Acker 1992:567).

The public/private distinction has also received criticism from researchers focusing on non-Western countries. In many African countries, for example, women engage in economic activities outside of the home, such as trade; women and men often both have control over household finances; and women form collectives with one another for mutual benefit (Staudt 1986). Many of the public/private distinctions that do exist in these African countries came about during colonialism, when Western powers engaged in trade solely with men, undercutting female influence. Thus, although women across the world have less power than men do in the public realm, there are still important cultural distinctions to keep in mind.
When talking about women in Africa and other countries of the **global south** (formerly known as the Third World), feminists often point out that these women must manage multiple forms of disadvantage or oppression. Not only do they suffer the universal subordination shared by women across the world, but also they must contend with living in poorer or less-developed countries. Therefore, to reiterate the discussion in the earlier section on women’s substantive representation, it is important to realize that, although women may share a common identity grounded in reproduction or status, they are not a monolithic group. Women have differential amounts of power based on factors such as region, class, religion, race, and ethnicity.

When talking about these multiple sources of power or disadvantage, feminists use the term **intersectionality** (Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 2000; hooks 2000). The idea of intersecting disadvantage is useful because it is difficult to average or add up the situation of being a racial, ethnic, or religious minority and the situation of being a woman to equal the experience of being a minority woman. Nor can you privilege either gender or minority status as the defining category for identity (Hancock 2005). Intersectionality research asks one to consider that women who are also poor, minority, or from the global south face multiple sources of oppression that may not combine in simple ways.

Earlier in this chapter, we introduced the work of feminist political theorists who argue that gender-neutral terms such as *individual* or *citizen* actually signify White males. Similarly, intersectionality researchers find that statements about women as citizens, activists, or politicians are often truly statements about White women, whereas research on minorities focuses on minority men. But as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1994) articulated, “[W]omen of color experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color, and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women” (p. 99). And politically, women may be situated in multiple groups that pursue conflicting agendas (Crenshaw 1994). Without focusing on the intersections of disadvantage, the unique obstacles faced by minority women seeking rights, opportunities, or representation may simply be ignored altogether.

Throughout this volume, we attempt to incorporate research on women at the intersection of a wide variety of social positions. For instance, we discuss how across many countries, White women received political rights before women of color (see Chapter 2). In our discussion of the impact of female legislators, we consider how the underrepresentation of minority women may lead to policies that marginalize women of color (see Chapter 7). In discussing the United States, we highlight differences in the voting behavior and political participation of women across class and minority status.
(see Chapter 9). And in Chapter 5 we introduce the story of the first transgender member of parliament in New Zealand.

But our efforts to present information about women at the intersections of disadvantage are also complicated by the fact that countries and political parties do not keep good records of the race, ethnicity, and class backgrounds of their politicians. We may know that a country has 10% women in its parliament, but we do not know whether those women are all of one ethnic group or caste. Although we have little information about the race, ethnicity, religion, and social class of female legislators across the world, having more women should increase the chance that the range of views across women is replicated in the political arena (Kanter 1977). But it is appropriate to end our discussion by highlighting the importance of keeping difference among women in mind, even when we are unable to directly talk about it.