Executive Summary:
Toward Gender Parity in Local Political Representation? Insights from India, Morocco, and South Africa

Gender Quotas and Women's Participation in Local Politics

The implementation of electoral gender quotas at the local level has seen a significant rise in recent years, with 75 countries now adopting these policies. However, gender quota research tends to focus on national politics, often overlooking women's roles in local politics. Studies from India, Morocco, and South Africa provide important insights into the role of local-level gender quotas and women's participation in elected positions.

> **Proportional Representation** allocates seats based on the percentage of votes each party wins. The greater the number of parties in PR systems, the greater the likelihood that one party will actively promote women candidates.
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> **Gender Quotas** require that women constitute a specific number or percentage of the members in a candidate list, parliamentary assembly, committee, or other government body. Gender quotas provide an efficient method to achieve gender balance in political institutions (International IDEA, n.d.).

This was discussed at a GLD roundtable, "Gender and Local Politics in the Global South," on April 4, 2024. Panelists included **Marwa Shalaby** (Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison), **Anjali Thomas** (Associate Professor in the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs at Georgia Institute of Technology), and **Safia Farole** (Assistant Professor in the Department of Politics and Global Affairs at Portland State University). **Allison Sambo** (Director of Evaluation & Analytics, Global Fund for Women) moderated the session. Their discussion focused on the significance of studying women's influence in local governments, as women currently hold 36% of local offices worldwide, but only 25% of seats in national parliaments (UN Women, 2022).

The Role of Gender Quotas

The panelists emphasized the role that proportional representation electoral systems and gender quotas play in enhancing women's participation. Marwa Shalaby noted that the introduction of gender quotas in Morocco in 2009 resulted in an impressive 18% increase in women's representation in local governance by 2015, success that is part of a broader trend across the region. Anjali Thomas also noticed that India's 1993 Constitutional Amendment mandates women hold a minimum of 33% of local seats, and Safia Farole explained South Africa's Constitution requires 50% female representation on party lists.

However, there are limitations to the effectiveness of quotas. Anjali Thomas and colleagues' study in Bihar, India, found that exposure to women entering local politics through gender quotas doesn't systematically lead to constituents voting for women in higher-level politics. This finding holds, even when local women leaders are seen as effective. Safia Farole highlighted that the absence of legal consequences for non-compliance allows political parties to decide whether to include women in their candidate lists. The urban-rural divide compounds this issue, as women are more likely to be represented in urban areas. Marwa Shalaby pointed to a similar outcome in Morocco; political parties field women for quota seats but rarely for competitive ones at the subnational level, or where women are more able to secure seats beyond gender quotas tends to be in urban regions.

These examples emphasize the importance of structured policies and legal frameworks in promoting gender equality. They also underscore the necessity for a more reflective approach to policymaking. Considering the socio-cultural contexts in which these policies operate would help ensure a more comprehensive, sustainable path towards achieving gender parity.

Beyond Quotas

Merely having a minimum number of women candidates isn't sufficient. Women candidates often face resource scarcity during election campaigns, raising significant challenges regarding security, networking, funding, and meeting societal expectations. By scheduling campaign events at family-friendly times, ensuring safety measures to prevent violence against women candidates, and promoting inclusivity, political parties can help overcome women's barriers in political campaigning.

Party ideology also affects gender parity in public office. In a [recent publication](#), Anjali Thomas and her colleagues found upper-caste women associated with the Hindu nationalist party were less likely to gain voters' support, suggesting that party ideologies with patriarchal gender norms can undermine women's electoral success. Conversely, Safia Farole explained that, despite the prevalence of patriarchal attitudes in many societies within Africa, voters are not necessarily deterred from supporting female candidates. Given the various factors influencing support for women's political representation, it is important to reexamine our theories and consider other factors voters prioritize.

Conclusion

Implementing gender quotas and proportional representation electoral systems has significantly increased women's political representation, but there is still substantial room for improvement. Policymakers may consider the following measures:

- **Quota compliance enforcement**: Implement strict legal consequences for political parties that fail to meet gender quota requirements, such as financial penalties or disqualification from elections.
- **Expand beyond quotas:** Mandate that parties field women candidates for competitive seats with a high likelihood of success, not just to fulfil quotas.
- **Support women candidates:** Support women's campaigns through training, networking opportunities, and financial assistance.
- **Ensure safety:** Develop and enforce strict anti-harassment policies and security measures to protect women candidates and elected officials and hold parties accountable for providing safe campaign environments.

- **Address Intersectionality:** Recognize the unique challenges faced women from marginalized communities face and ensure policies promote diversity within gender representation.

Women's representation is a powerful tool to promote gender equality and challenge patriarchal gender norms. It's important to further expand our theories to understand other factors influencing women's political participation and design evidence-based policies to promote women's representation.

References:

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