Call for Contribution: Volume 33, Issue 2

Women's leadership in politics and governance: understanding the potential of transformative feminist leadership

About the journal

Gender & Development (G&D) is a unique journal that offers a forum to share experiences and analysis between feminist activists, scholars, and women leaders across the globe working in research, policy, and practice. The July 2025 Issue of G&D will focus on 'Women's leadership in politics and governance: understanding the potential of transformative feminist leadership.'

The context

Women's leadership in politics as well as in social movements and grassroots collectives have played a historic role in transforming the landscape of women's social, legal, and political rights across the globe. The last century witnessed the realisation of significant milestones in achieving women's basic human rights such as the right to vote, the right to property, right to equal pay, reproductive rights and bodily autonomy, rights within marriage, rights to physical security, the recognition of the women-dominated care economy, and even the right to divorce in many countries.

Women's participation in political and public spheres is thus integral to the achievement of social justice and has been a key demand and commitment in multiple international conventions. One of the many demands of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women was iterating women's political equality and participation and making governments and states accountable for their realisation (OCHR n.d). The World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, held in 1985 in Nairobi, also saw governments pledging to work towards increasing women's political participation. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action prioritised women's leadership through advocating for "measures to further women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making", and increasing "women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership" (The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women 1995). More recently, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) reiterate the need to ensure women's full participation at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life in SDG 5.5.

However, the ratification of international agreements and having women in leadership positions does not necessarily ensure meaningful political participation or feminist transformative change. As *Gender & Development's* 2021 issue on 'Feminist protests and politics in a world in crisis' asks, "Are women purposefully elected to represent women's interests? Is this the fundamental reason for increasing women's representation in politics? Is it useful to assume that all women in parliament

are interested in pursuing a radical transformative agenda? How do we make sense of the co-option and subversion of affirmative action policies by political parties and political elites to reward proxies?" (Nazneen and Okech 2021, 245). In other words, do women in power bring genuine feminist transformations?

Some of the key components comprising transformative feminist leadership include questioning, challenging, and dismantling power dynamics and hierarchies that characterise traditional leadership, implementing a collective agency, instilling a democratic, transparent, self-reflective and accountable political culture, working towards collective/collaborative leadership, as well as cultivating spaces for learning and mentoring (Wakefield 2017, Batliwala 2022). Feminist transformative leaderships work towards developing anti-racist, anti-patriarchal, anti-ableist, and anti-casteist political cultures, while questioning any singular, universal (read colonial/north centric) notion of leadership. This special issue will explore multiple and contesting definitions of women's transformative leadership and shine light on what is new in the arena of women's feminist leadership that has not been adequately explored.

Trends and challenges in women's political representation

Women's active involvement in key decision-making and policy realms has played a critical role in striving for gender justice. Global data by the UNDP reveals that higher levels of political participation by women is associated with lower risk of civil wars, state led violence, and violation of political rights (Yeshaneh 2023). Meaningful political participation at all levels by women leads to a deepening of democracy, increased cooperation across party lines as well as between ethnic groups, and a more responsive political culture which translates to more responsive policy making towards women's interests (Pepera 2018). There is also increasing evidence that shows that women's participation contributes positively towards the conclusion of peace talks and the implementation and durability of peace agreements (Tandon et al 2023). The value and potential of women's political participation and feminist organising in creating transformative political change which "prioritise wellbeing and ameliorate and transform the structural inequalities that give rise to injustice in the first place" (Piscopo and Och 2021, 549), is thus widely understood (Nazneen and Okech 2021; Tsikata and Ossome 2024).

Despite the transformative potential of women in politics, peacekeeping, and policymaking, women remain underrepresented in political parties, legislatures, and policy arenas across geographical locations. According to UN Women, as of June 2024, 28 women occupy the highest office of head of State and/or Government in only 27 countries (UN Women, n.d.). Countries in South Asia like India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan have seen women heads of state, although mere presence do not necessarily translate into feminist political leadership. Most women heads of state in South Asia are a product of dynastic politics, and their tenure in office has so far rarely exhibited significant departures from the interests and objectives of the male relatives they have replaced (Bukhari 2021).

Less than 25 per cent of Cabinet members heading a ministry are women and the five most common portfolios they hold include women and gender equality, family and children's affairs, social justice, and indigenous and minority affairs (UN Women n.d.). In terms of legislative positions, about 27 per

cent of parliamentarians in single or lower houses of parliament are women. There are regional variations in women's presence in positions of power: 36 per cent of parliamentary seats in Latin America, 33 per cent in Europe, 27 per cent in Sub-Saharan Africa, and 23 per cent in Eastern and South Eastern Asia (ibid). UN Women data shows that women are 35.5 per cent of local decision-makers across 141 countries (ibid). Globally, women's representation in parliaments is at 26.9 per cent as of March 2024 (IPU, 2024)

Women face social, cultural, structural, and institutional barriers in participating in political and public life. The differentially gendered public and private space divide, deeply embedded traditional gender roles, negative stereotyping, and the threat of violence, all inhibit women's full and effective political participation (Dersnah n.d). Additionally, the unequal burden of unpaid domestic and care work, the perception of leadership being a male domain and prerogative, and backlash and harassment, all serve to constrain and inhibit women's participation in public decision-making at all levels (UNESCAP 2019). At the structural and institutional level, restrictive selection processes, direct and indirect discrimination, and resistant attitudes towards diversity within political parties, as well as lack of access to information, networks, role models (Maguire 2018) and funding (Gómez and d'Antuono 2023) serve as impediments. This means that women face structural barriers that prevent them from advocating for their interests and in shaping decisions that would be beneficial for different groups of women (Hoare and Gell 2009). These barriers are compounded many times over for Black, indigenous, Dalit and rural women, Queer persons, Trans persons and Persons with Disabilities and vary across cultures and geographies. Thus, race, class, caste, and gender add layers of discrimination and marginality among women political representatives. Bateson (2020) explored the underrepresentation of women of colour in US politics and found that racism and sexism strongly shape whom people find electable, with Black women being considered the least electable. The author also found that even anti-Trump voters took into consideration race and sex of candidates to assess who would be able to defeat Trump. Similarly, the intersection of caste and gender negatively shapes the way that political leaders who are Dalit are treated, with many facing discrimination, abuse, and violence in Nepal and India (Nepali 2024; Upadhyay 2023, Khanna 2023).

Other factors that shape women's access to political leadership in many African countries post-independence were political openings, international pressures, and factors in the post conflict setting (Tripp 2023). Marwa and Laila (2020) in their research on women in legislative committees in the SWANA region found women's ability to shape law making was limited due to gender stereotyping. Similar research on Turkey's parliamentary processes found that women's political image and speechmaking tended to negatively affect their electability (Yildirim et al 2019).

Women in political leadership also face extreme public and moral scrutiny if they fail to uphold traditional feminine norms. Motherhood has been a powerful frame for political mobilisation and contestation in certain political and cultural contexts (Mhajne and Whetstone 2020). Franceschet, Piscopo, and Thomas (2015) relook at women's political participation in Latin America, revisiting Elsa Chaney's argument that motherhood was used by women to justify their political participation. The authors argue that while the strategic frames have morphed - the traditional *supermadre*, the technocratic caretaker, the macho minimiser, and the difference denier - women's access continues to be deeply shaped by "structural constraints and cultural narratives that privilege traditional feminine ideals of caretaking." Pullen and Vachhani (2020) problematise the conceptualisation of

women's leadership as based on care and empathy, that is very much in feminised and maternal terms and in contrast to male leadership which is dominantly characterised by 'effectiveness' and 'rationality'. This simplistic conceptualisation of women's leadership is embedded in neoliberal ideology (individualism, effectiveness, singularity, gender binary) and ends up reproducing inequitable gender dynamics and prevents feminist transformative leadership to develop (ibid). This scrutiny and discrimination gets compounded for LGBTQIA persons and acts as barriers for candidates for not adhering to "heterosexist norms of politics" (Wagner 2019). This does not mean that care and empathy are not desirable traits for feminist leadership, rather, that these should not be exclusively and solely ascribed to women leaders.

Policy initiatives have been implemented to ensure inclusion of women in national and state legislatures as well as in municipal bodies. These include constitutional guarantees such as legislative gender quotas that have seen mixed results depending on whether they are reserved seats or voluntary electoral quotas (Dahlerup 2005). International studies that explore the effectiveness of electoral reservations find that they vary in terms of symbolic and substantive effects, as well as over time and as per the historical trajectories of different countries (Park 2022; Su and Chen 2023). For instance, in Brazil, electoral quotas did provide incentives for political elites to support women candidates, but this does not necessarily lead to a significant increase in the number of women legislators at the federal level (Miguel 2008). In India, the women's numbers remain far below the one-third mark (Jacob 2024). Moreover, mere inclusion of women in political bodies does not necessarily lead to transformative changes and often we see reproduction of gender and other inequities play out in different ways. Another challenge is that women who work as lower rung functionaries are regarded as cheap 'governance labour' and utilised by local political parties and the bureaucracy without acknowledging them as political actors with agency (Devika 2016). A political and feminist critique of this normative and binary framing of women's leadership is thus required.

Our special issue

Globally, there has been a trend of reversal of hard-earned gains of women's rights. The UN draws attention to this concerning trend in a press release, stating, "Rising authoritarianism, economic crises and rocketing inequality have posed considerable challenges to achieving and maintaining women's human rights. Not only is the advancement of women's rights and full equality too slow, uneven, and far from a global reality, but women's hard-fought achievements now risk being reversed" (Villarreal 2023). For instance, the Taliban's ban on women from working, Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention against gender-based violence, the reversal of the Roe vs. Wade judgment in the US - restricting access to abortions (ibid), and advocacy for restricting abortions in Poland by conservative political and religious forces (Margolis 2019). This growing pushback is not just as a consequence of the pandemic, but also resulting from an alliance of heterogeneous groups, including conservative parties and movements, fundamentalist, and anti-rights sectors (Villarreal 2023).

These grim events call for serious political efforts towards creating and scaling feminist transformative leadership and drawing learnings from each other to identify the conditions propitious for sustaining feminist gains and advancing the project of gender equality. There is a need to go beyond the 'benefits' of increasing women's representation in politics, especially black women,

Dalit women, indigenous women, migrant women, rural women, women with disability, queer and trans women, and view it within the framework of rights and as a basis to bring social justice for the most marginalised women and groups.

This special issue of *Gender & Development* will explore the role and position of women and LGBTQIA persons within political parties, provincial and state legislatures, and local governing bodies where they have the ability to formally influence political processes and decision-making. Importantly, this special issue will investigate the ideological contestations and heterogeneity embedded in women's leadership(s) in global South(s) (as well as the 'souths' in the global North and also global North), and the extent to which these align or depart from what is widely/universally considered to be feminist leadership (Batliwala 2010, De Vela and Ofreneo 2009) comprising gender equality, collective agency, shared decision making, plurality, and dissent. This special issue aims to unpack women's and feminist leadership from a decolonial feminist lens, foreground alternate theories and epistemologies, and shine light on new and under theorised aspects of feminist leadership.

Key objectives and themes of the Issue

This call for contributions seeks to understand the contexts, factors, and challenges that shape women's leadership in executive offices, cabinets, national and local legislatures, the judiciary, and regional and international organisations, as well as social movements, and in turn, how their leadership in these positions shapes legal, political, and social rights for the most marginalised. This special issue aims to:

1. Explore under what conditions women's political leadership generates feminist transformations?
2. Understand the ways in which women's leadership in political institutions shapes political, social, and economic rights for the most marginalised populations; in other words, does it commit to gender equality.
3. Unpack the entrenched social biases, prejudices, and power dynamics that women's participation (or lack thereof) in political institutions reveals. In other words, the relationships between women in political positions and power structures.
4. Draw lessons from policy and practical experience to advance, strengthen, and expand the theory and practice around transformative feminist leadership.

This issue will focus on the following questions and sub-themes:

- What is the role of the state, new technologies, political dynamics, and geopolitics in shaping, limiting, constraining or enabling women's feminist transformative leadership - at local, national, international levels?
  - What are the economic, social, and especially the political conditions (eg. type of governing regime, informal power dynamics, party systems, level of women's mobilisation) that enable women in public decision-making to work as feminist leaders and build political will and bureaucratic capacity for significant policies and practical shifts that promote gender equality?

- o What factors enable women to have leadership positions in political parties, municipal bodies, as well as local and national political institutions?
- o What roles do ideology, caste, race, and religion play in canvassing political support, in shaping political leadership, and in affecting political participation, mobilisation, and political activism?
- o What are implications of digital and cyber technologies and communications on women leaders?

- What is the impact of women's political leadership on the most marginalised, including Black women, Dalit women, trans persons, queer persons, persons with disability, and on critical issues like environmental and climate justice and more?
  - o Are women occupying high ranks in political hierarchies able to prioritise the economic, social, and legal interests of women and other marginalised groups?
  - o What is the relationship of women's movements to women's leadership in political parties and decision-making processes?
  - o How does this relationship shape political commitments to gender justice and social equality?

- What are some emerging and under-researched/under-theorised areas in the field of women's feminist leadership, particularly in the global South?
  - o What are the various pathways to women's leadership positions in different arenas such as political parties, collectives, grassroots mobilisation, etc.?
  - o What strategies or initiatives have helped increase meaningful women's political participation?
  - o How are different kinds of leadership such as individual and collective/collaborative leadership operationalised?
  - o What alternative and new theories and epistemologies around feminist leadership can be collectively built based on these experiences?

- What are the ways in which women are able to combat challenges and dangers and bring about transformative feminist leadership?
  - o What is the impact of violence against women in politics on women's interest in engaging in politics? (tokenism, vote bank politics, not giving women leaders meaningful political work or power, social norms and pressures, care burdens, social expectations, political rivalries and competitions, trolling/bullying, violence (threat and actual), the continuation of patriarchal style politics or dynastic politics, or reproduction of unequal and discriminatory practices)

Our guest editors:
This special issue will be guest edited by Peggy Nash, Tainah Pereira, and Jennifer Smout, who have been involved in feminist political activism and knowledge generation on feminisms and transformative leadership.

Submissions
We invite community and grassroots leaders, women's rights and human rights activists, civil society organisations and networks, those working in governance, researchers and academics, policymakers, and practitioners who are directly involved in municipal, local and national governance, bureaucratic

and administrative institutions; feminist leadership and movement builders; human rights and environmental defenders to contribute to this critical theme. We especially invite contributions that share case studies and practice-based recommendations.

Please submit your abstract or proposal here: https://forms.gle/9mM3zhu7bkaGdG5Q9
Deadline: 30 September, 11:59pm UTC.
Please read the Guidelines for contributors carefully before abstract/proposal submission.
Please send any queries to genderanddevelopment.south@gmail.com.

Guidelines for content
- Full research articles should be no more than 7,000 words excluding references and abstract and annexures. The annexures can include photographs, maps, images, graphs, etc. Multi-media content can be embedded within the article and should be kept below 500MB file size.
- Shorter essays should be 4,000 words, and these can include photographs, maps, images, graphs. Multi-media content should be kept below 500MB file size.
- Photo essay and illustrations can be uploaded on Flickr or any other image sharing platforms and then shared with the editorial team.
- All content must be original and authors are responsible for obtaining necessary consent and permission for the use of any third-party material.

For more information on the journal, visit: www.genderanddevelopment.org

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