Gender and Political Empowerment:Women in the Global South's Polarized Societies

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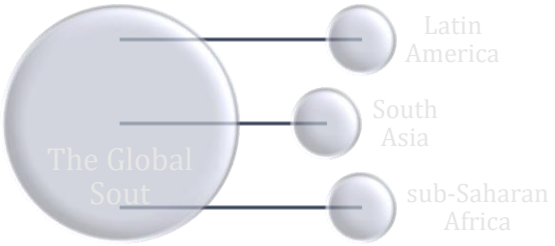
I. INTRODUCTION

In 21th century political empowerment of a woman is very crucial that deeply connected with gender equality in political participation remains a critical dimension of democratic development, yet the Global South continues to experience persistent gender disparities in governance.



South Asia, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa—is often marked by polarized political environments where ideological, ethnic, religious, and class-based divisions create complex challenges for inclusive governance. Women in the global south face significant political participation barriers. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, women are underrepresented in national parliaments in nearly all countries, including the global south. This lack of representation can limit women's ability to influence laws and policies that affect their lives.

Balanced political participation and power-sharing between women and men in decision-making is the internationally agreed target set in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action . This paper investigates the nexus of gender and political empowerment in these polarized societies, addressing crucial research questions: What barriers hinder women's access to parliamentary roles in polarized societies? How do socio-political dynamics shape their political participation? Is parliamentary presence sufficient for genuine political empowerment? What strategies can promote more inclusive governance? Through a mixed-method approach, this paper examines statistical data, legal frameworks, and qualitative case studies to offer a comprehensive analysis of the gendered implications of political polarization in the Global South.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender and political empowerment have been widely studied across disciplines. Feminist institutionalism argues that political institutions—both formal and informal—are gendered and often disadvantage women (Krook & Mackay, 2011).

Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (Report of the Secretary-General (E/CN.6/2021/3).
The concept of intersectionality further expands this understanding by demonstrating how overlapping identities such as ethnicity, class, and religion exacerbate exclusion (Crenshaw, 1991).
Political polarization, defined by McCoy et al. (2018) as the widening of ideological or identity-based divisions, disproportionately affects marginalized groups, especially women.

In polarized societies, women are often caught in political crossfires or excluded from decision-making processes due to heightened hostility, violence, and delegitimization (Piscopo, 2016).
Scholars highlight that descriptive representation does not necessarily lead to substantive representation, particularly when women's political roles are symbolic or confined to gender-specific issues (Franceschet et al., 2012).

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative data were collected from Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), UN Women, and regional election commissions to assess women's representation and legal frameworks. Qualitative insights were drawn from secondary data like; literature, case study analyses, and media reports. The research evaluates variables such as the percentage of women in national parliaments, implementation of gender quotas, instances of gender-based political violence, and the role of political parties and movements. Three regions were selected due to their varying political contexts and relevance to the broader Global South.

IV. FINDINGS /RESULT

Historically, women's political participation has been limited by cultural, social, and economic barriers. The suffrage movements of the early 20th century marked the beginning of Women's political participation in many countries of the Global North. However, it wasn't until the latter half of the 20th century that significant strides were made, with women gaining the right to vote and stand for elections in most parts of the Western world. Today, countries like Rwanda, Cuba, and New Zealand lead the way in women's parliamentary representation, with women holding over 50% of seats in their national legislatures.

In contrast, Globally, only 23% of cabinet members are women. At the same time, countries, particularly in West & South Asia, still struggle with low levels of female political representation with just 15 countries have achieved gender parity in their national cabinets. Despite important frameworks like the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women), and international accords like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring political parity for women is still a global concern.

The Global South

The Global South encompasses a large and diverse group of countries, and while there isn't a single, universally agreed-upon list, it's generally understood to include 134 countries, primarily from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the South Pacific. This group is often referred to as the "Group of 77 and China. The Global South is a also knows as developing countries, least developed countries undeveloped countries, low-income economies or the out of favour third world countries.

Women in the Global South face significant underrepresentation in political leadership, though there are notable examples of progress. Globally, women hold only about 27% of legislative seats. While some countries, like Rwanda, have achieved high percentages of female representation in parliament, overall, the global trend is slow, with UN Women projecting equality in leadership positions to take another 130 years

Regional Analysis

Historically, women in the global south have been marginalized and oppressed, with limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. However, in recent years, significant efforts have been to empower women and promote gender equality in the global south. (Advancing gender equality in West Asia, 10 January 2018)

A. South Asia **:** women remain largely excluded. Social stigma, political violence, and the perception of women as weak leaders restrict broader female participation (Nazneen & Tasneem, 2010).

South Asia is home to some of the world's earliest female political leaders, It have a rich history of women actively participating in socio-political movements. From the Indian independence movement led by figures like Sarojini Naidu to the more recent political achievements of women like Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, the region has witnessed the gradual but significant inclusion of women in political spheres.

While progress has been made, South Asian countries still grapple with gender disparities in political representation. Women continue to face obstacles such as cultural stereotypes, patriarchal norms, and a lack of access to education and resources. Despite these challenges, there have been notable achievements, with women holding key positions in governments, legislatures, and local bodies.

In India, only 15% of the Lok Sabha (lower house) comprises women as of 2024, despite efforts such as the Women's Reservation Bill, which proposes reserving one-third of seats for women (IPU, 2024). In Pakistan and Bangladesh, reserved seats have enabled

women's entry into parliament, yet these positions are often filled through indirect nominations, limiting democratic accountability (Bari, 2010).

Political polarization, rooted in ethno-religious divides and dynastic politics, further marginalizes women. For example, women from politically influential families may gain access to power, but grassroots

B. Latin America: Latin America demonstrates high levels of female parliamentary representation, partly due to robust gender quota laws. Countries like Bolivia and Argentina mandate parity laws that require political parties to alternate between male and female candidates (Hinojosa, 2012). As a result, Bolivia had nearly 50% female representation in its national legislature by 2023 (UN Women, 2023). Women hold 36 per cent of parliamentary seats in Latin America

Despite progress, polarization remains a barrier. The rise of populist leaders has often coincided with misogynistic rhetoric, targeting female politicians with threats and harassment. In Brazil, the political climate under Bolsonaro was marked by increased online attacks against women in politics (Wylie & Dos Santos, 2020). Nevertheless, feminist movements such as Ni Una Menos have played a pivotal role in pushing back against political violence and expanding the political space for women.

C- Sub-Saharan Africa: This area and regions of the continent of Africa that lie south of the Sahara. These include Central Africa, East Africa, Southern Africa, and West Africa. Political polarization, especially in post-conflict and ethnically divided societies, tends to exclude women from meaningful participation. While international organizations and NGOs have supported women's involvement, customary law and patriarchal traditions often override statutory protections (Ahikire, 2007).

In sub-Saharan Africa, there are 27 per cent of women legislators, followed by Eastern and South-Eastern Asia with 23.5 per cent, Oceania with 20 per cent, Northern Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa presents a diverse landscape. Rwanda stands out as a global leader in gender representation, with women occupying 61.3% of parliamentary seats in 2024 (IPU, 2024). However, this success is not uniform. In countries like Nigeria, women hold less than 10% of parliamentary seats, and face significant challenges due to religious conservatism, political patronage, and violence (Tripp, 2015).

Women in Sub-Saharan Africa face significant challenges and inequalities, including high maternal mortality rates, limited access to education and healthcare, and disparities in economic opportunities. However, there are also signs of progress and empowerment, particularly in areas like women's participation in the workforce and education.

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATION: While descriptive representation is a necessary step, it does not guarantee substantive empowerment. Women often face constraints within parties and legislative bodies, including lack of influence over major policy decisions and assignment to "soft" portfolios like health or education. Studies show that women are more likely to champion gender equity, but only when supported by institutional mechanisms and party alignment.

Table

Women as Presidents/Prime Ministers in Global South

Region	Name	Country	Year
South Asia	Sheikh Hasina	Bangladesh	2009–Now
Latin America	Dilma Rousseff	Brazil	2011–2016
Sub-Saharan Africa	Ellen Johnson Sirleaf	Liberia	2006–2018

(UN Women. *Global Database on Women in Politics*)

Empowerment must be both symbolic and substantive—meaningful participation in decision-making, agenda-setting, and leadership roles. Without this, representation risks becoming tokenistic. Women in the global south have been marginalized but there are some differences in **the** women's representation in parliaments of South Asia, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. A Comparative Table is there to have a look to understand the whole political scenario.

Table Women in Lower Houses

Region	Country	Women in Parliament (%)
South Asia	India	14.94
Latin America	Bolivia	46.2
Sub-Saharan Africa	Rwanda	61.3

(UN Women, *Global Database on Women in Politics*)

IMPACT OF POLARIZATION: Polarization amplifies existing gender inequalities. Divided societies are less likely to prioritize gender reforms, and consensus-building becomes difficult. Political polarization has also normalized antagonistic behavior that discourages female participation. In conflict-ridden or highly divided societies, women are often relegated to symbolic roles or co-opted by dominant factions to showcase diversity without enabling real power (Basu, 2016).

However, polarization can create political openings for outsider candidates, including women, especially in contexts where traditional parties lose legitimacy. Feminist movements have leveraged moments of crisis to push for institutional reforms, as seen in Chile's recent constitutional reform process (Piscopo & Siavelis, 2021).

STRATEGIES AND BEST PRACTICES**:** Effective strategies for enhancing women's political empowerment include:

- Gender Quotas: Quotas work best when accompanied by placement mandates and enforcement mechanisms.
- Capacity Building: Leadership training, mentorship, and political education programs can enhance women's political readiness.
- Civil Society Engagement: NGOs and grassroots movements play a vital role in mobilizing support and advocating reforms.
- Legal Protections: Laws addressing gender-based political violence and campaign financing parity are crucial.
- Cross-party Caucuses: Women's parliamentary caucuses can foster collaboration beyond ideological lines and advance gender-sensitive legislation.

BARRIERS TO POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT: Several structural and cultural barriers hinder women's political empowerment in polarized societies:

A. Economic Inequality: Limited access to campaign financing puts women at a disadvantage.
B. Cultural Norms: Deep-seated patriarchal values limit women's political aspirations and discourage voter support.
C. Political Violence: Female politicians often face gender-based violence, including verbal abuse, physical threats, and online harassment (Krook, 2020).
D. Party Dynamics: Male-dominated parties often sideline female candidates or assign them less winnable seats.
E. Legal Gaps: Inadequate enforcement of gender quotas and weak legal protections contribute to underrepresentation.

RECOMMENDATIONS/ SUGGESTIONS: After proper research and understanding of the issues faced by women in the Global South and the impacts that they have on the socio-economic development of the regions, it can be stated that the second gender plays a very integral role in nation building and it is imperative to have well-structured policy-making and implementations by the respective governments of the nations.

This needs to be seen as a global movement that brings the entire Global South together to fight for women's socio-economic and political rights and make this region a better place to live for them but the Women in the Global South face multifaceted challenges in polarized societies, ranging from socio-cultural barriers to institutional exclusion and political violence. While gender quotas and legal reforms have improved descriptive representation, structural change remains uneven. Polarization adds another layer of complexity, deepening gender divides and reducing opportunities for inclusive governance. To address these challenges, the following policy six recommendations are essential:

1. First of all, Enforce gender quotas with placement mandates and penalties for non-compliance.

2. Secondly, government must Implement legal protections against political violence and online harassment.
3. Third, there is a need to promote women's political education and capacity-building programs.
4. Forth, should encourage cross-party coalitions and women's caucuses to advance gender equity.
5. Fifth, must support grassroots and feminist movements to push for institutional reforms.
6. Six, also supposed to be the will of the people to ensure and change in the mental and social outlook towards women that enhances the socio-economic and political opportunities for them.

V. CONCLUSION

Women's political empowerment in the Global South is a complex interplay of historical, structural, and contemporary factors. While political polarization presents significant challenges, it also offers avenues for mobilization and reform. Harnessing digital tools responsibly, implementing inclusive policies, and fostering grassroots and transnational collaborations are essential steps toward achieving gender-equitable political landscapes.

Ultimately, gender equality in political empowerment must be both structural and transformative, enabling women not just to enter politics, but to reshape it. The urge for change shall come not only from the Government but also supposed to be the will of the people to ensure sustainable growth. and change in the mental and social outlook towards women that enhances the socio-economic and political opportunities for them.

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