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Women in National Governments Around the Globe: Fact Sheet

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Introduction

Women and girls make up half of the world's population; however, in most countries, women are underrepresented in the political process at the national level. As this report shows, women currently hold 23.4% of legislative seats around the world, an increase from 11.8% of legislative seats in 1998 (see **Figure 1**). As of November 1, 2018, women held 50% or more of the legislative seats in three countries: Rwanda, Cuba, and Bolivia (see **Table 3**). At the executive level, 23 countries currently have an elected female head of state or government. Since 1960, about 110 women have been elected or appointed as head of the national government in approximately 70 countries.[1]

The participation and representation of women in elected government is generally considered healthy for their communities. As Heather Nauert, then-Acting Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, and State Department Spokesperson, stated in March 2018, "the low status of women and girls has vast political, economic, and social implications. It can limit the ability of communities to resolve conflict, countries to boost their economies, or regions to grow enough food."[2]

Supporting efforts to empower women, the 115th U.S. Congress enacted the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017 (P.L. 115-68) with the aim to increase the participation of women in conflict prevention and conflict resolution processes as a means to build more inclusive societies and to help stabilize countries and regions. This act expressed the sense of Congress that "the political participation, and leadership of women in fragile environments, particularly during democratic transitions, is critical to sustaining lasting democratic institutions."[3] Past Congresses have appropriated funds for programs operated by the Department of State and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to establish governments that are representative and inclusive, as well as programs to empower women politically and economically.[4]

This report provides a global snapshot of women's political participation worldwide by compiling statistics and other information from a variety of sources, including *The Global Gender Gap Report 2018* issued by the World Economic Forum, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, the *CIA World Factbook*, news reports, and other sources.

Voting Rights

The right to vote is a primary step toward involving a populace in the political decisions of a government. In many countries, voting rights were originally granted only to adult men who owned property, then were eventually expanded to include all adult male citizens regardless of property ownership, then women, and then other underrepresented groups. Definitions of what constituted a "citizen" may also have changed over time, even as they did in the United States,

[1] *The Global Gender Gap Report 2018*, prepared by The World Economic Forum, December 18, 2018, https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2018.

[2] Heather Nauert, remarks at the 2018 Annual International Women of Courage Awards Ceremony, Washington, DC, March 23, 2018, https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/03/279541.htm.

[3] P.L. 115-68 §3(2).

[4] P.L. 115-141, Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018, Section 7059(b) appropriated $50 million "to increase leadership opportunities for women in countries where women and girls suffer discrimination due to law, policy, or practice, by strengthening protections for women's political status, expanding women's participation in political parties and elections, and increasing women's opportunities for leadership positions in the public and private sectors at the local, provincial, and national levels." This language was repeated in both H.R. 6385 and S. 3108, introduced in the 115th Congress for FY2019 Department of State and Foreign Operations appropriations.

and gradually have become more inclusive of minorities and indigenous peoples. Other countries enacted universal suffrage from their very foundings, granting the right to vote to all adults, male and female, regardless of ethnicity, religion, economic standing, or other criterion.

Table 1 and **Table 2,** respectively, list the first and latest countries to extend the right and duty of voting to women. Although subnational regions (e.g., states, provinces) may have granted the right to vote earlier, the years in the tables below indicate when suffrage was extended for national elections to female adult citizens.

Table 1. First Countries to Allow Women to Vote

Year	Country(ies)	Year	Country(ies)
1893	New Zealand	1917	Canada*
1902	Australia*	1918	Austria, Estonia, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland*, Kyrgyz Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, United Kingdom*
1906	Finland	1919	Belarus, Belgium*, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Sweden*, Ukraine
1913	Norway	1920	Albania, Czech Republic, Iceland**, Slovak Republic, United States
1915	Denmark, Iceland*	1921	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Sweden**

Source: The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/suffrage.htm.

Notes: Some countries granted suffrage in stages, at first denying the right to women of certain racial, ethnic, or economic groups. One asterisk (*) indicates the first year female citizens were allowed to vote in national elections with limitations; two asterisks (**) indicate when those limitations were removed. No asterisk indicates there were no restrictions and all female adult citizens were granted the right to vote.

Table 2. Most Recent Countries to Allow Women to Vote

Year	Country
2003	Qatar
2005	Kuwait
2006	United Arab Emirates
2013	Saudi Arabia

Source: Pamela Paxton and Melanie M. Hughes, *Women, Politics, and Power: A Global Perspective*, 2nd edition, SAGE Publications, 2014, p. 50-51; and the *CIA World Factbook* on Suffrage, at https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/fields/311.html#AF.

Legislative Representation

Women's suffrage has been closely linked to women's participation in legislative bodies. In 1907, the voters of Finland elected 19 women to the country's new unicameral parliament a year after Finnish women were granted suffrage; this was the first election in the world in which the names of both female and male candidates appeared on the ballot. On the other end of the spectrum, women voted and appeared on ballots in Saudi Arabia for the first time in 2015.

Gender Quotas

Several countries have instituted quotas to ensure that women are represented on the ballot or in the legislature. Similar quotas may also be used to ensure ethnic or religious diversity in the national legislature of some countries (e.g., Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq).

The *Atlas of Electoral Gender Quotas* explains that "[g]ender quotas are numerical targets that stipulate the number or percentage of women that must be included in a candidate list or the number of seats to be allocated to women in a legislature. They aim to reverse discrimination in law and practice and to level the playing field for women and men in politics." *The Atlas* further states that "gender quotas have proved to be the single most effective tool for 'fast-tracking' women's representation in elected bodies of government."[5]

Three main types of gender quotas are generally recognized, and they may be used at the national or subnational level, or both:

- **Legislated candidate quotas.** These quotas are mandated through national constitutions or legislation to regulate the gender composition of the ballot.
- **Legislated "reserved seats."** These quotas reserve a specific number or percentage of seats in the legislature for women members. The quotas are mandated through national constitutions or legislation and are implemented through special electoral procedures.
- **Party quotas (also known as voluntary party quotas).** These quotas are adopted by individual political parties through the party's statutes and rules. Such adoption is the prerogative of each party, and some parties in a country may adopt quotas while other parties choose not to do so.

Table 3 shows the number of seats held by women in the national legislative chambers of selected countries. The countries listed include the 19 nation members of the G-20 (excluding the European Union) and the 12 countries that have legislative bodies with 40% or more of the seats held by women. Two members of the G-20—South Africa and Mexico—are included in the 12 countries with more than 40% women legislators.

Table 3. Female Representation in National Legislatures of Selected Countries

As of November 1, 2018, and January 4, 2019 (for the United States)

IPU Rank by % of Total Seats Held by Women	Country	Type of Legislative System	National Level Gender Quota Codes[a]	Total Legislative Seats	Total Seats Held by Women	% of Total Seats Held by Women
1	Rwanda	Bicameral	RS	106	59	55.7
2	Cuba	Unicameral	None	605	322	53.2
3	Bolivia	Bicameral	C, P	166	86	51.8
4	Mexico	Bicameral	C, P	628	304	48.4
5	Sweden	Unicameral	P	349	161	46.1
6	Nicaragua	Unicameral	C, P	92	42	45.7
7	Costa Rica	Unicameral	C, P	57	26	45.6

[5] The *Atlas of Electoral Gender Quotas* was a joint project of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and Stockholm University, published in June 2014, p. 16, available at https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/atlas-electoral-gender-quotas?lang=en.

IPU Rank by % of Total Seats Held by Women	Country	Type of Legislative System	National Level Gender Quota Codes[a]	Total Legislative Seats	Total Seats Held by Women	% of Total Seats Held by Women
8	Finland	Unicameral	None	200	84	42.0
9	Senegal	Unicameral	C, S	165	69	41.8
10	South Africa	Bicameral	P	450	187	41.6
11	Belgium	Bicameral	C	210	87	41.4
12	Norway	Bicameral	P	169	70	41.4
15	Argentina	Bicameral	C, P	329	130	39.5
26	France	Bicameral	C, P	924	330	35.7
27	Italy	Bicameral	P	950	338	35.6
38	Australia	Bicameral	P	226	74	32.7
41	Germany	Bicameral	P	778	245	31.5
44	Canada	Bicameral	P	431	134	31.1
53	United Kingdom	Bicameral	P	1,441	417	28.9
69	China	Unicameral	RS	2,980	742	24.9
96	United States	Bicameral	None	528	127	24.1
103	Saudi Arabia	Unicameral	RS	151	30	19.9
104	Indonesia	Unicameral	C	560	111	19.8
121	Turkey	Unicameral	P	596	104	17.4
123	South Korea	Unicameral	C, P	300	51	17.0
139	Brazil	Bicameral	C, P	594	89	15.0
157	India	Bicameral	Sub only	779	91	11.7

Source: Compiled by the Congressional Research Service using data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union at http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm, and the Gender Quotas Database at https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/database, published by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, as posted on December 20, 2018.

Notes: The selected countries listed here include the 19 national members of the G-20 (excluding the European Union) and the 10 countries with the highest percentage of legislative seats held by women in the national legislative body.

a. Three codes indicate the type of gender quota used in the country: C=legislated quotas for candidates on the ballot level; RS=legislated quotas for reserved seats; P=voluntary party quotas; Sub only=quotas at the subnational level only, as identified by the Gender Quotas Database.

Table 4 lists countries where women hold fewer than 8% of the legislative seats.

Table 4. Countries Where Women Hold Fewer than 8% of Legislative Seats

As of November 1, 2018

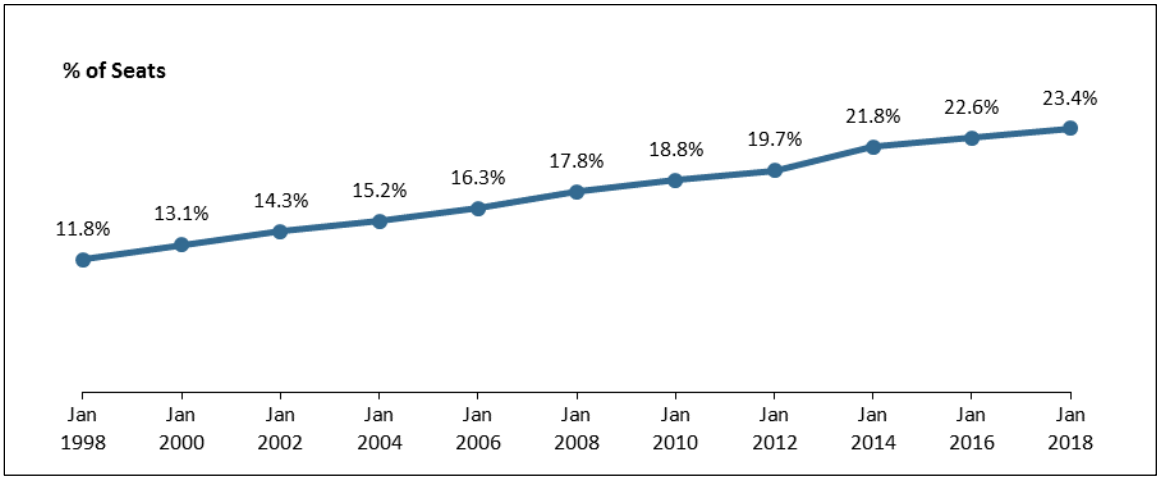
Tonga: 7.4%	Iran: 5.9%	Lebanon: 4.7%	Micronesia: 0%
Benin: 7.2%	Maldives: 5.9%	Kuwait: 3.1%	Papua New Guinea: 0%
Tuvalu: 6.7%	Sri Lanka: 5.8%	Haiti: 2.7%	Vanuatu: 0%
Kiribati: 6.5%	Nigeria: 5.8%	Solomon Islands: 2.0%	
Comoros: 6.1%	Thailand: 5.3%	Yemen: 0.5%	

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, as of November 1, 2018, http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm.

Over the years, the percentage of seats held by women in national parliaments has risen worldwide from 11.8% in January 1998 to 23.4% by January 2018 (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Worldwide Percentage of Seats Held by Women in National Legislatures

1998-2018

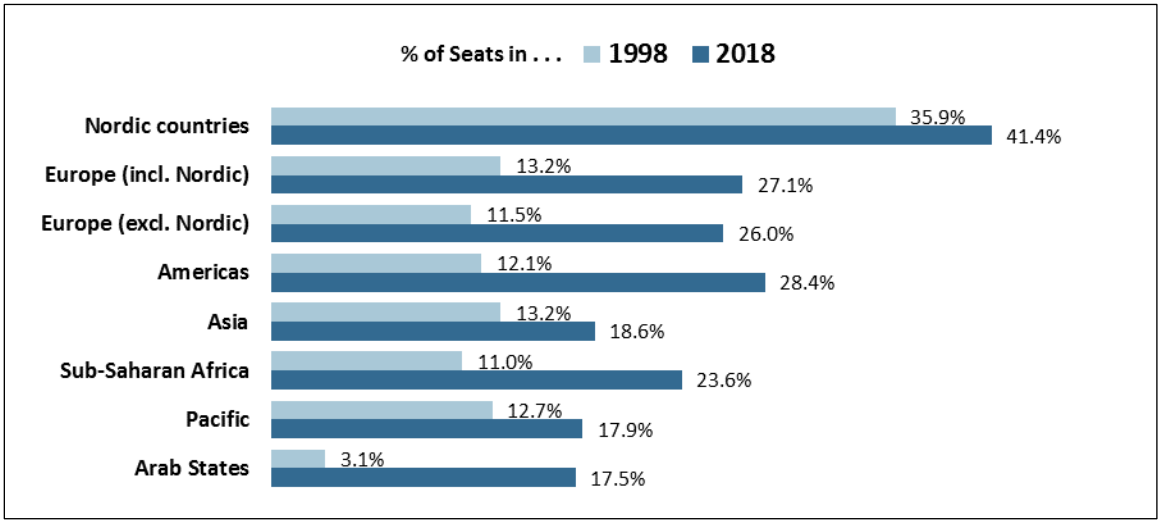


Source: Compiled by the Congressional Research Service using data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union available at http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/world-arc.htm.

As shown in **Figure 2**, the countries of the Americas, Europe (excluding the Nordic countries), and the Arab States increased the percentage of legislative seats held by women by 14.4% of seats or more from 1998 to 2018.

Figure 2. Regional Percentages of Seats Held by Women in National Legislatures

1998-2018



Source: Compiled by the Congressional Research Service using data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, available at http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/world-arc.htm.

Executive Representation

At least 70 countries have chosen a woman as their executive since Sirima Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka was selected as the world's first female Prime Minister in 1960. Executives may be selected through various methods: directly elected from a ballot dedicated to the executive office; indirectly elected by the legislature; appointed, following legislative elections, as the leader of the majority political party or majority coalition; or through other indirect means.

Women Leaders in the 21st Century

Table 5. Current Women Executives

Country	Name	Title	Dates in Office
Ethiopia	**Sahle-Work** Zewde[a]	President	Oct. 25, 2018–present
Barbados	Mia **Mottley**	Prime Minister	May 25, 2018–present
Trinidad and Tobago	Paula-Mae **Weekes**[a]	President	Mar. 19, 2018–present
Romania	Viorica **Dancila**[a]	Prime Minister	Jan. 29, 2018–present
Iceland	Katrin **Jakobsdottir**	Prime Minister	Nov. 30, 2017–present
Aruba	Evelyn **Wever-Croes**[a]	Prime Minister	Nov. 17, 2017–present
New Zealand	Jacinda **Ardern**	Prime Minister	Oct. 26, 2017–present
Singapore	Halimah **Yacob**[a]	President	Sept. 14, 2017–present
Hong Kong[b]	Carrie **Lam**[a]	Chief Executive	July 1, 2017–present
Serbia	Ana **Brnabic**	Prime Minister	June 29, 2017–present
Turks and Caicos Islands	Sharlene **Cartwright-Robinson**[a]	Premier	Dec. 20, 2016–present
Estonia	Kersti **Kaljulad**[a]	President	Oct. 10, 2016–present
United Kingdom	Theresa **May**	Prime Minister	July 13, 2016–present
Taiwan	**Tsai** Ing-wen[a]	President	May 20, 2016–present
Burma[c]	**Aung San Suu Kyi**[a]	State Counsellor	Apr. 6, 2016–present
Marshall Islands	Hilda C. **Heine**[a]	President	Jan. 28, 2016–present
Nepal	Bidhya Devi **Bandhar**[a]	President	Oct. 29, 2015–present
Croatia	Kolinda **Grabar-Kitarovic**	President	Feb. 19, 2015–present
Malta	Marie-Louise Coleiro **Preca**	President	Apr. 4, 2014–present
Norway	Erna **Solberg**	Prime Minister	Oct. 16, 2013–present
Lithuania	Dalia **Grybauskaite**	President	July 12, 2009–present
Bangladesh	Sheikh **Hasina**	Prime Minister	1996–2001; Jan. 6, 2009–present
Germany	Angela **Merkel**[a]	Chancellor	Nov. 22, 2005–present

Source: Compiled by the Congressional Research Service using information from the *CIA World Factbook*, available at https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/fields/312.html#AG, and the

Global Gender Gap 2018, published by the World Economic Forum, at https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2018, and news sources.

Notes: Surnames appear in bold face.

a. This woman is the first female to hold this position in her country.

b. Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, but it enjoys a high degree of autonomy. Although President Xi Jinping is China's chief of state, Chief Executive Carrie Lam is recognized as the head of Hong Kong's government and, as such, is responsible for the day-to-day governance of Hong Kong.

c. Provisions in Burma's 2008 constitution prohibit Aung San Suu Kyi from holding the position of President. As the leader of the National League for Democracy, the majority party in the national legislature following the 2015 parliamentary elections, she was selected by the parliament for the new position of State Counsellor, created in April 2016. She is recognized as the de facto leader of the civilian side of Burma's government, which includes a robust military component. She concurrently serves as the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister for the Office of the President. Burma's current President is Win Myint, a close friend of Aung San Suu Kyi.

Other women leaders in the 21st century include the following:

- Khaleda **Zia:** Prime Minister of Bangladesh, 1991-1996 and 2001-2006.
- Mireya **Moscoso:** President of Panama, 1999-2004.
- Helen **Clark:** Prime Minister of New Zealand, 1999-2008. After leaving office, Clark became the Administrator of the United Nations Development Program.
- **Megawati** Sukarnoputri: President of Indonesia, 2001-2004.
- Gloria Macapagal **Arroyo:** President of the Philippines, 2001-2010.
- Portia **Simpson-Miller:** Prime Minister of Jamaica, 2006-2007 and 2012-2016.
- Michelle **Bachelet:** President of Chile, 2006-2010 and 2014-March 2018.
- Ellen Johnson **Sirleaf:** President of Liberia, 2006-January 2018. Sirleaf was the first woman to be elected the head of state of an African country.
- Cristina Fernandez **De Kirchner:** President of Argentina, 2007-2015.
- Pratibha **Patil:** President of India, 2007-2012.
- Yinglluck **Shinawatra:** Prime Minister to Thailand, 2011-2014. Shinawatra was forced to leave office after the constitutional court found her guilty of abusing her power.
- Dilma **Rousseff:** President of Brazil, 2011-2016. Rousseff was the first woman elected as President of Brazil and was reelected in 2014. Over allegations of corruption, she was impeached and removed from office in August 2016.
- **Park** Geun-hye: President of South Korea, 2013-2017, the first female President of the country. Park became the country's first democratically elected president to be impeached on grounds of corruption and removed from office.

Women Leaders of the 20th Century

Table 6 identifies several notable female executives in the 20th century.

Table 6. Notable Women Executives, from 1960 to 2000

Country	Name	Title	Years in Office
Sri Lanka	Sirimavo **Bandaranaike**	Prime Minister	1960-1965; 1970-1977; 1994-2000
Bandaranaike was the world's first female Prime Minister			
India	Indira **Gandhi**	Prime Minister	1966-1977 and 1980-1984
Gandhi was assassinated while in office; she was succeeded by her son, Rajiv.			
Israel	Golda **Meir**	Prime Minister	1969-1974
Meir and her husband immigrated to then Palestine in 1921. She was a founder of the State of Israel and the fourth prime minister.			
Argentina	Isabel Martinez de **Perón**	President	1974-1976
Peron was world's first female president.			
United Kingdom	Margaret **Thatcher**	Prime Minister	1979-1990
Thatcher became the first woman prime minister in Europe and was the only British prime minister in the 20th century to be elected to three consecutive terms.			
Philippines	Corazon **Aquino**	President	1986-1992
Pakistan	Benazir **Bhutto**	Prime Minister	1988-1990 and 1993-1996
In January 1990, Bhutto became the first prime minister to give birth while in office. New Zealand's current prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, became the second prime minister to do so, having a daughter in June 2018.			

Source: Compiled by the Congressional Research Service using news and other sources, such as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and *Gale Biography in Context*.

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