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Gendered Leadership and Structural Barriers: Evaluating Women's Political Participation And Representation

Pacifique MUTİJİMA [1*] iD, Elif GAZİOGLU TERZİ [2] iD

[1] Dr., Erciyes University, Kayseri, Türkiye

[2] Prof. Dr., Erciyes University, Kayseri, Türkiye

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the debate on whether women participate in politics differently from men, with a specific focus on leadership styles and political proposals. The aim is to critically examine how gender influences political behavior and leadership, assessing whether these differences are primarily shaped by gender roles and stereotypes or by structural factors such as patriarchy, socio-cultural norms, and economic inequality. The methodology includes a comprehensive review of existing literature, comparing feminist theories that emphasize gendered leadership styles with critiques that argue structural barriers are more influential in shaping political participation. The article highlights how women in political leadership often advocate for social welfare, education, and gender equality, but also cautions that increased representation does not guarantee substantive gender equality, as shown in case studies like Rwanda.

Keywords: Gendered Leadership, Political Participation, Representation

Toplumsal Cinsiyet Temelli Liderlik: Kadınların Siyasal Katılımı ve Temsili Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme

ÖZET

Bu makale, kadınların siyasal katılımı konusunu toplumsal cinsiyet merceğinden ele almakta, kadınların liderlik tarzları ve politika önerileri bağlamında erkeklerden farklılaştığına yönelik argümanı tartışmaktadır. Çalışmanın amacı, toplumsal cinsiyetin siyasi davranış ve liderlik üzerindeki etkisini eleştirel bir şekilde incelemek ve bu farklılıkların esasen toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinden mi yoksa ataerki, sosyo-kültürel normlar ve ekonomik eşitsizlik gibi yapısal

* Sorumlu yazar/Corresponding author
E-mail/e-ileti: mutijima.pacifique@yahoo.com

faktörlerden mi kaynaklandığını değerlendirmektir. Metodoloji, feminist teorilerin cinsiyete dayalı liderlik tarzlarına vurgu yapan yaklaşımları ile yapısal engellerin siyasi katılım üzerinde daha etkili olduğunu savunan eleştirileri karşılaştıran kapsamlı bir literatür incelemesini içermektedir. Makale, kadınların siyasi liderlikte sosyal refah, eğitim ve toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği gibi konuları sıklıkla savunduğunu vurgularken, artan temsiliyetin her zaman somut bir toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliğini garanti etmediğini ve bu duruma Ruanda gibi vaka çalışmalarıyla dikkat çekildiğini de belirtmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Cinsiyet Temelli Liderlik, Siyasi Katılım, Temsil

1. INTRODUCTION

This article aims to address the debate on whether women engage in politics differently from men, particularly in terms of their leadership styles and political proposals. This question has long been central to gender studies and political science, with scholars exploring whether women's political behavior is shaped by gender roles, stereotypes, or structural factors (Dolan, 2010). Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, this paper compares the arguments that support the idea of distinct political styles for women with those that refute such claims. Additionally, it investigates which factors, if any, are more significant in shaping women's political participation and leadership.

The central question this article seeks to answer is: Do women do politics differently than men? The inquiry is built on various feminist and political theories, evaluating how gender influences political behavior, decision-making, and leadership styles. While some argue that gender profoundly affects political conduct, others contend that structural and institutional factors play a larger role (Fenstermaker & West 2013; Lindsey, 2020). This article contributes to this debate by synthesizing key findings from existing research and offering a critical analysis of gender's role in politics.

2. THE DEBATE ON GENDERED LEADERSHIP STYLES

The literature on political leadership often suggests that gender plays a critical role in shaping leadership styles. According to Matsa and Miller (2013), political proposals and leadership styles have traditionally been presumed to be influenced by one's gender. Fenstermaker and West (2013) note that men are generally perceived as more autocratic and task-oriented, corresponding with the "instrumental" dimension of gender stereotypes, which include traits such as aggression, independence, dominance, and rationality. In contrast, women

are more likely to be considered democratic and relationship-oriented, associated with the "communal" dimension, characterized by compassion, sensitivity, and understanding (Nielsen & Huse, 2010). However, it is critical to contextualize these findings within diverse cultural and societal frameworks. For instance, leadership practices in non-Western societies often exhibit nuanced gender dynamics, shaped by localized traditions, histories, and socio-political structures. In some Indigenous and matrilineal societies, women's leadership emphasizes collective governance and community welfare, demonstrating models distinct from binary Western categorizations of 'masculine' or 'feminine' traits (Amadiume, 1997).

Empirical support for this relationship between gender and leadership styles comes from Rhee and Sigler (2015), who conducted two studies that found gender stereotypes align closely with leadership behaviors. In their research, respondents perceived masculine traits as consistent with structuring, while feminine traits were linked to consideration and interpersonal relationships. This dichotomy between "structuring" and "consideration" forms the basis for distinguishing between "masculine" and "feminine" leadership styles. As Eagly and Johnson (1990) argue, leadership behaviors associated with women, such as democratic decision-making and a focus on interpersonal connections, are often categorized as feminine, while more autocratic and task-driven behaviors are classified as masculine.

The question of whether leadership styles are inherently gendered has been a central debate in political science and organizational leadership studies for decades. Traditional views suggest that leadership styles are significantly influenced by one's gender, with men and women exhibiting distinct approaches to decision-making, management, and political governance. This debate often stems from essentialist perspectives that link biological differences between men and women to differences in behavior and leadership (Rhee & Sigler, 2015). On the other hand, however, framing gendered leadership purely through biological or psychological lenses risks erasing the profound impact of socio-historical factors. For instance, historical contexts such as the leadership of women in pre-colonial African societies or the political roles of Ottoman sultanas illustrate the importance of socio-political frameworks in shaping gendered leadership norms (Khurshid, 2010). These examples challenge universalist assumptions by emphasizing context-specific pathways to women's political engagement.

The idea that men and women adopt different leadership styles is deeply embedded in the division of instrumental and communal gender traits. Men, according to this view, tend to exhibit leadership styles that prioritize efficiency, goal achievement, and structural order, often

referred to as task-oriented or autocratic leadership (Babiak & Bajcar, 2019). This style is consistent with the broader societal expectation that men are rational, decisive, and assertive leaders. Historically, these qualities have been idealized in leadership roles, particularly in political and business settings where power and control are highly prioritized (Babiak & Bajcar, 2019).

In contrast, women's leadership styles are framed as relationship-oriented, emphasizing collaboration, empathy, and interpersonal connection. Women leaders are often described as more democratic in their decision-making processes, seeking input from others and fostering inclusive environments (Eagly & Carli, 2007). This approach aligns with the communal aspects of gender roles, where women are expected to be nurturing, caring, and focused on the well-being of others. Feminist scholars have pointed out that these stereotypes not only shape how women and men are perceived in leadership but also influence how they behave, as societal expectations place pressure on individuals to conform to gendered norms of leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

2.1. Structural Factors Influencing Women's Political Participation

While gender roles and stereotypes offer one lens through which to understand women's political behavior, structural factors are equally, if not more, significant in determining women's access to and effectiveness in political participation. Structural barriers, deeply embedded in societal, economic, and political systems, have historically limited women's engagement in governance and decision-making processes (Tabassum & Nayak, 2024). These barriers often manifest in various forms, from patriarchal societal norms to political institutions that are inherently biased against women. Understanding these structural factors is crucial to fully grasping the challenges women face in politics (Molla, 2013).

One of the most pervasive structural barriers to women's political participation is patriarchy, a system of male dominance that defines gender roles and reinforces the exclusion of women from positions of power. Patriarchy is not only a social ideology but a framework that organizes political, economic, and cultural life in ways that systematically privilege men over women. According to Khelghat-Doost and Sibly (2020), patriarchy confines women to the private sphere of home and family, assigning them roles as mothers and caregivers, while reserving the public and political spheres for men. This division is deeply entrenched in many societies and has significant implications for women's ability to access leadership positions.

In patriarchal societies, political power is often viewed as a male domain, where leadership qualities such as assertiveness, rationality, and decisiveness are associated with masculinity (Šavriņa & Sedlmayr, 2016). Women, on the other hand, are stereotyped as emotional, nurturing, and passive—traits that are considered unsuitable for political leadership. This ideology not only limits women's entry into politics but also shapes how women who do participate in politics are perceived. Female politicians often face scrutiny for their leadership styles, with their decisions being judged more harshly compared to their male counterparts. Patriarchal norms also perpetuate the belief that politics is incompatible with women's roles as caregivers, reinforcing the expectation that women should prioritize domestic responsibilities over public engagement (Šavriņa & Sedlmayr, 2016).

Moreover, patriarchal structures often legitimize male dominance in political decision-making processes by controlling access to political resources and networks. In many societies, political power is passed down through male-dominated patronage systems, where men hold positions of influence and are responsible for selecting and promoting political candidates (Farias et al., 2023). This creates a vicious cycle in which women are systematically excluded from power structures, and even when they do enter politics, they are often marginalized or placed in token positions where their influence is limited.

2.2. Political Institutions And Systemic Exclusion

Beyond societal norms, political institutions themselves serve as significant structural barriers to women's political participation. Many political systems, particularly those in more conservative or authoritarian contexts, are designed in ways that disadvantage women, either by explicitly excluding them from power or by creating environments that are hostile to female leadership. Political parties, as key gatekeepers to political participation, are often structured in ways that prevent women from ascending to leadership roles (Mai, 2016).

Male-dominated party structures are a central obstacle. In many political parties, men dominate the leadership, and decisions about candidate selection and party platforms are made by male elites who often prioritize male candidates and male-centric political agendas. As Waylen, G. (2015) points out, women's interests are often disregarded or sidelined within political parties, which focus on issues deemed to be of greater "national" importance, such as economic policy or national security—areas traditionally dominated by male perspectives. As

a result, issues related to gender equality, social welfare, and women's rights are often seen as peripheral and are not given the attention they deserve in party platforms (Waylen, 2015).

In addition, political parties may not provide adequate support for female candidates, either financially or through mentoring and professional development opportunities. Women who seek to enter politics often face significant obstacles in gaining party nominations, as political parties tend to favor candidates who are already embedded in male-dominated political networks. This reinforces the status quo, where women are underrepresented in key leadership positions within political parties and government institutions (Verge & Claveria, 2018).

Furthermore, institutional sexism within political bodies creates environments where women are not taken seriously or are actively undermined. Female politicians often face sexism and harassment in the workplace, which can discourage their participation or limit their ability to function effectively within political institutions. This hostile environment may prevent women from advancing their careers or from taking on leadership roles that require high levels of visibility and authority (Krook & Sanín, 2020).

2.3. Socio-Cultural Norms And The Double Burden Of Care

In addition to political structures, socio-cultural norms play a significant role in limiting women's political participation (Suleiman, 2017). In many societies, women are expected to prioritize their roles as mothers and caregivers, often referred to as the "double burden" of balancing domestic responsibilities with professional work. This expectation leaves women with limited time, energy, and resources to engage in political activities, attend meetings, campaign, or hold leadership positions. The double burden disproportionately affects women, particularly in developing countries, where domestic work is less likely to be shared with male partners or outsourced (Suleiman, 2017).

In patriarchal cultures, women who step outside their traditional roles to pursue political careers often face resistance from their families and communities. They may be seen as neglecting their duties as mothers or wives, leading to social disapproval and even ostracism. This dynamic can significantly affect women's decisions to run for office or seek leadership roles, as the personal costs of political engagement may outweigh the potential benefits (Khelghat-Doost & Sibly, 2020).

Cultural restrictions in certain regions further limit women's political participation. In parts of South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, for instance, practices such as purdah (the seclusion of women) and sex segregation inhibit women's mobility and restrict their access to public life. In these societies, women are often confined to the private sphere and are discouraged from interacting with men in public spaces, including political forums. This cultural isolation makes it difficult for women to engage in political campaigning, attend public meetings, or develop networks of supporters that are crucial for political success (Moosa vd., 2013).

These cultural expectations also affect the way female politicians are viewed once they are in office. Women who do succeed in entering politics are often expected to adopt roles that align with traditional gender norms, such as focusing on "soft" policy areas like education, healthcare, and family welfare, rather than areas like defense, finance, or national security, which are seen as more appropriate for men. This pigeonholing of women into specific policy domains not only limits their influence but also reinforces the notion that women are not suited for positions of high political power or decision-making in critical areas of governance (Murray & Sénac, 2018).

2.4. Economic Inequality And Access To Political Resources

Economic inequality is another significant structural factor that affects women's political participation. Politics, particularly in competitive electoral systems, requires substantial financial resources. Running a successful political campaign involves paying for media coverage, campaign materials, travel expenses, and, in some cases, hiring professional staff and consultants. Women, especially those from low-income or marginalized communities, often lack access to the financial resources needed to compete on equal footing with male candidates (Milazzo & Goldstein, 2019).

Economic disparities between men and women are well-documented across both developed and developing countries. In patriarchal societies, women are less likely to control property or financial assets, and they are often excluded from the formal economy. This lack of financial independence translates into fewer opportunities for women to fund their own political campaigns or to seek the financial backing of wealthy donors, who are more likely to support male candidates. Additionally, political fundraising networks are often male-dominated, and women may find it difficult to access the same financial networks that are available to men.

Even when women do enter politics, economic inequality continues to limit their influence (Moosa vd., 2013).

Female politicians from lower-income backgrounds may find it difficult to advocate for policies that challenge the status quo, as they are reliant on financial backers or party elites who may have vested interests in maintaining existing economic structures. This economic dependence can undermine women's ability to push for progressive policies that address gender inequality or benefit marginalized communities (Luxton, 2018).

In addition to financial barriers, educational inequality further limits women's political participation. In many parts of the world, women and girls continue to have less access to education, particularly higher education, which is crucial for building the skills and knowledge needed for effective political leadership. Women who lack formal education or professional experience may find it difficult to navigate the complex bureaucracies of political institutions or to gain the respect of their male peers (Luxton, 2018).

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the debate surrounding gendered leadership and the role of structural barriers in shaping women's political participation is both complex and multifaceted. While gender roles and stereotypes have long influenced perceptions of leadership, the evidence suggests that these differences are often exaggerated or oversimplified. Feminist scholars argue that the association between leadership styles and gendered traits—such as men being more task-oriented and women being more relational—is a reflection of broader societal norms rather than inherent differences. Empirical research, while highlighting some patterns in leadership behavior, also indicates that leadership is a flexible and adaptive skill that transcends gendered binaries.

Moreover, the structural barriers that women face in politics, particularly in patriarchal systems, play a far more significant role in limiting their political participation than individual leadership styles alone. These barriers, deeply rooted in societal norms, political institutions, and economic inequality, prevent women from accessing leadership positions and exercising their political influence. Patriarchy, as an ideological and structural system, continues to exclude women from political power by reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting women's opportunities for political engagement. This systemic exclusion creates a vicious cycle in which women's voices are marginalized in political decision-making processes.

The analysis of political institutions reveals that male-dominated party structures often serve as gatekeepers, limiting women's access to leadership roles. Political parties, as critical actors in political participation, frequently prioritize male candidates and male-centric agendas, leaving issues related to gender equality and social welfare on the periphery. Furthermore, women's political participation is hindered by the absence of financial support and mentorship opportunities, which are essential for building a successful political career. Institutional sexism within political parties and legislatures further exacerbates these challenges, creating hostile environments that discourage women from pursuing leadership roles.

Socio-cultural norms also play a critical role in shaping women's political behavior, as women often bear the "double burden" of balancing domestic responsibilities with political careers. In many societies, women are expected to prioritize their roles as caregivers, limiting their time and energy for political engagement. These cultural expectations not only affect women's participation in politics but also influence how female politicians are perceived. Women who do enter politics are often pigeonholed into "soft" policy areas, further limiting their influence in critical decision-making arenas such as defense and finance.

Economic inequality, another significant structural barrier, compounds the challenges women face in politics. The lack of financial resources necessary to run competitive political campaigns disproportionately affects women, particularly those from marginalized communities. Without access to political fundraising networks, which are often male-dominated, women struggle to compete on equal footing with their male counterparts. Additionally, educational inequalities further limit women's opportunities for political leadership, as formal education and professional experience are crucial for navigating complex political systems.

In light of these challenges, the article concludes that while gendered leadership styles may reflect societal stereotypes, it is the structural barriers embedded in political and economic systems that present the greatest obstacles to women's political participation and representation. Addressing these barriers requires a concerted effort to challenge patriarchal norms, reform political institutions, and provide women with the resources and support needed to succeed in leadership roles. Only through such systemic change can substantive gender equality in political participation be achieved.

STATEMENT OF RESEARCHERS' CONTRIBUTION RATE

The contribution of researchers to the study is equal.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

Çalışma kapsamındaki herhangi bir kurum veya kişiyle çıkar çatışması yoktur.

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