

# Women's Participation in Politics and Strategies to Raise the Present of Women within Politics

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## Abstract

Women have come to the forefront in social science research within the last century. Thus, discussions around women's issues have naturally taken place in political science. In relation to women and politics, this study will first focus on women and their previous existence in the political sphere; secondly, the contributions of women within the political arena will be discussed in depth followed by a focus on the obstacles that hinder the existence of women in politics and the ways and methods to increase their political participation. Of the areas where gender inequality is greatest, politics comes first. Today, the participation of women in politics, especially in political decision making processes, is not proportionate to their population. Sometimes this is a result of their own choosing; however, this is mostly caused by social and cultural structures. When one considers the lack of female participation in the political sphere as a problem, it becomes clear that something needs to be done. This study focuses on what has been done and what can be done in order to increase women's political participation.

## Keywords

Woman • Women's political participation • Politics • Political parties • Quotas

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The problems and issues of women are not limited in interest strictly to individuals who qualify or have been qualified as feminists. Many thinkers, whether feminists or not, are able to participate in debates related to the various opinions that have been put forth regarding women's problems and issues (Demir, 2014, p. 12). Similarly, the topic of women and politics has also entered the field of interest of many thinkers, whether they are feminists or not, and women's place in politics has been in discussion for quite a while. Among these thinkers are those who consider the political participation of women as something that won't and can't contribute positive value to this area, and there are those who have expressed that women's contributions to politics both as individuals and because of their feminine values would be positive. The main reason most often put forth by those who advocate that women's political participation would not be of added value is the belief that their political participation, even in voting which is the most common form of participation, is affected by men such as their spouses, fathers, or brothers. In other words, they have the perception that the political behaviour of women is always directed by men, sometimes knowingly, and sometimes unknowingly. The initial justification for those advocating the need for women to participate in politics corresponds to the spread of women's increased involvement in politics as a pursuit of human rights and to the positive transformation of the politics of feminine values (Demir, 2015, pp. 27–30).

As debating all aspects of these claims is a subject on its own, this study must confine itself to what has been expressed here in the second group. Namely, women should participate in politics and this participation will provide added value to the political arena.

As it can be understood with simple observation, women's participation in politics throughout the world and the percentage that occurs in political bodies is less than that of men.

Statistical data has also revealed this. When viewed regionally, countries with the highest rate in this regard are Scandinavian countries, and countries with the lowest

Table 1  
*The Percentage of Women Members in Parliament and Senate According to Region (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015)*

	Parliament	Senate	Both together
Scandinavian Countries	41.5	---	---
American Continent	26.5	25.5	26.4
European OSCE member countries (including Scandinavian countries)	25.3	24.3	25.1
European OSCE member countries (excluding Scandinavian countries)	23.7	24.3	23.8
Southern Part of Sahara Desert in Africa	22.7	20.3	22.4
Asia	19.0	13.3	18.4
Arab countries	18.1	7.3	16.1
Pacific	13.1	36.0	15.7

rates are Arab and Pacific countries. As shown in Table 1, the representation of women in parliaments as of April 2015 was 41.5% in Scandinavian countries compared to 16.1% in Arab countries and 15.7% in Pacific countries. Turkey is included as a region of Asia. The rate of female representation in this area is 18.4%.

As seen in Table 2, the percentage representing female parliament members in Turkish Parliament was rising and falling until 1987. Since 1987, this number has been subject to a steady increase, though at a slower pace. This rate of increase grew exponentially in 2007 and 2011. In other words, the percentage of women representatives in Parliament was 1.3% in 1987, and this percentage reached 14.4% in 2011, the year of the previous election (Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2012, p. 5). For the last election on November 1, 2015, this rate was 14.7%. Despite this increase, the percentage of female representatives is lower than the average of Asian region it is a part of, even lower than the regional averages of Arab and Pacific countries' percentage of female representation, which had come last on the list.

Table 2

*Number of Representatives and Percentages represented in Parliament According to Gender*

Election Year	Total Number of Representatives	Number of Men	Percentage of Representation (%)	Number of Women	Percentage of Representation (%)
1935	399	381	95.5	18	4.5
1939	429	413	96.3	16	3.7
1943	455	439	96.5	16	3.5
1946	455	456	98.1	9	1.9
1950	487	484	99.4	3	0.6
1954	541	537	99.3	4	0.7
1957	610	602	98.7	8	1.3
1961	450	447	99.3	3	0.7
1965	450	442	98.2	8	1.8
1969	450	445	98.9	5	1.1
1973	450	444	98.7	6	1.3
1977	450	446	99.1	4	0.9
1983	399	387	97	12	3
1987	450	444	98.7	6	1.3
1991	450	442	98.2	8	1.8
1995	550	537	97.6	13	2.4
1999	550	527	95.8	23 <sup>3</sup>	4.2
2002	550	526	95.6	24	4.4
2007	550	500	90.9	50	9.1
2011	550	471	85.6	79	14.4
2015 <sup>4</sup>	550	457	83.1	93	16.1
2015	550	469	85.3	81	14.7

As shown in Table 3, the percentage of women represented in parliaments throughout the world is 22%. Turkey is one of the first countries to recognize voting rights for women; from 1934, women have had the right to vote and have been voted into Parliament. In spite of this, the percentage of Turkish women still falls far below the world average.

Table 3

*Female and Male Representation in the Combined Senates and Parliaments of the World*

## Senates and Parliaments Together

Total Number of Representatives	44,978
Known Distribution of Gender	44,945
Males	35,022
Females	9,923
Percentage of Women	22.1%

A South Asian researcher in 2005 mentioned that the political representation of women in Asia had not yet reached 30%, even though ten years had passed since the Declaration of Beijing (Francisco, 2005, p. 36). Today, although 20 years have now passed since this declaration, many countries have not approached this percentage. Regretfully, Turkey is one of these.

### Reasons for the Insufficient Number of Female Political Participation

What is meant by participation in politics or political participation? The answer to this question has a fairly wide range of issues such as voting and commenting on political issues, developing ideas, participating in political debate, going to rallies, party membership, and working in election campaigns; ultimately it means being a candidate for a political office (Demir, 2015, p. 21).

Shevedova (2005, pp. 33–82), in the study entitled “Barriers to Political Participation for Women,” examined the problems under three main headings: (1) political obstacles, (2) socio-economic obstacles, and (3) ideological and psychological obstacles.

**Political obstacles.** One of the most basic of these, the *governing political structure is male dominated*. Due to politics been given a masculine identity in terms of both historically and also with current political leadership, women are generally not directed towards leadership and politics in the process of socialization (Tekeli, 1982, pp. 375–396). Another aspects is the lack of party support in which rather than financial support, they are encouraged to support through morale and motivation. Entry into the political arena is through political parties; the gate keepers retain control of the nomination process into parties. These processes are quite difficult for women to pass without support (Dahlerup, 2005a, p. 19). A third issue is the *voting system*. The pluralist electoral system is not well suited as a structure and practice for selecting female candidates. An election system that is appropriate for more female involvement in parliament is a proportionally representative election system.

Another obstacle to be considered under this heading for Turkey in particular is that the attitude towards women of the elite that ruled in the aftermath of the Republic excluded veiled women in social and legal arrangements. As is known, one of the most important

symbols of Turkish modernization has been women. Since the early years of the Republic, the female model of the new regime were women who were not veiled. When looking at icons from this era, whether young girls in shorts, soldier uniforms or in school smocks carrying the flag, or women dancing in ballrooms, while being dressed in Western styles in particular come to the forefront (Kandiyoti, 1999, p. 112). For many years this model of femininity was imposed on society; presenting it as an option to all institutions, in particular educational institutions, in which this was imposed by the government where force was used. Even today, in spite of all these efforts, of all the women in the Turkish population, more than half of them have established themselves as wearing headscarves;<sup>2</sup> this reveals how different the approaches between the people and the ruling class were on the subject of headscarves during the first period of the Republic. This antinomy had continued for a long time, and only recently started to diminish.<sup>3</sup>

It can be said here that this process of modernization has also adversely affected the political participation of women in Turkey. This negative impact is seen revealed in the form of both direct and indirect restrictions. Although there were no legal obstacles or direct constraints regarding women with headscarves in terms of being members of Parliament, it was constrained with the same rigidity through infestations of persistence on political representation at educational institutions and in their efforts on public affairs. For many years, an implicit ban was implemented which assumed that women with headscarves, who were not allowed to be teachers, officers, judges, public prosecutors, or managers, could also not be representatives. The first attempt made to pierce the parliamentary taboo of wearing a headscarf in Parliament was subjected to failure when the oath of Merve Kavakçı, who had been elected in April 18, 1999 elections as a representative of Istanbul from the Fazilet Party, was revoked and her status as a representative removed for wearing a headscarf in Parliament on May 2, 1999. Thus for many years, women with headscarves were blocked from political participation because of this implicit ban.

**Socio-economic and psychological obstacles.** In short, unemployment and poverty, women's dual responsibilities and liabilities of home and work, and their lack of education, skills, and political interest women's economic weakness can be included in this group (Kalaycıoğlu, 1983, p. 20; Kandiyoti, 1982).

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2 According to the Turkish Statistics Institute's study "Religious Life in Turkey" which was performed on behalf of the Directorate of Religious Issues, the percentage of women who wear headscarves outside was 71.6% (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2014, p. 102).

3 AK Party (where women were found to make intense efforts in the organization and in the kitchen) couldn't show veiled women for their first three terms as the reaction to this was thought to affect the power of other institutions (judicial, military, universities, media, etc.). Parliament's first female deputy was sworn in without a headscarf in 2011. After the Hajj of 2013, Kahramanmaraş Representative Sevde Beyazıt, Denizli Representative Nurcan Dalbudak, and Konya Representative Gülay Samancı attended Parliament sessions with headscarves. It is worth noting that they opted for the presidential interim fellow Meral Akşener, MHP's parliamentary chairperson from the opposition party, who like them had made the pilgrimage. After the general elections that were held in 2015, AK party and HDP for the first time carried women candidates with headscarves.

Another barrier in this group is their weakness in “having the goods.” What is meant by weak features here is that women are generally less educated and paid less than men, and their interest and knowledge regarding the political sphere is weak. According to a study conducted by the European Council, 30% of men and 80% of women say they do not understand politics. It was stated that in Central Europe only one in three women read about politics in newspapers, and one in three women has never talked about politics (Koray, 1992, p. 204).

**Tools of media and their obstacles.** The media is able to prepare a suitable backdrop for creating language, perceptions, opinions, and attitudes against gender and women (Arscott, 1995, p. 75; Timisi, 1996, p. 25).

### **Implementations in which which Provide an Active Presence of Women in Politics**

Firstly, if the arrival of women at the desired point in politics is left to itself, this process will admittedly take a long time. Some express this could take between 70 to 80 years. That is, improvement is possible but the speed is very slow. Considering the problem is that there is still a low representation of woman, it becomes necessary to examine it in the scope of a nationwide project. A series of policies and regulations were observed to have been performed and carried out nationally in various areas such as legal regulations, electoral systems, quotas, and mobilization of civil-society organizations in countries that have raised the percentage of women in parliament (Cattleya, 2010; Dahlerup, 2005a). Applications that raise the rate of women's representation and responsibilities in institutions can be summarized as follows:

**Quotas.** It can be stated that globally the most effective way to increase the representation of women is with quotas. Quotas enable women to be able to enter a process that has systematically excluded them; thus, it ensures a greater number of women in politics (Dahlerup, 2005b, p. 141; Sancar, Acuner, Üstün, Bora, & Romaniuc, 2006, p. 25).

Quotas have different methods of administration. In general, a quota is applied mandatorily by being put into the constitution and/or election laws, or it is applied by political parties on a voluntary basis without legal obligation. Mandatory applications through the Constitution and laws are of two types. (1) A required number of seats are reserved for women in Parliament. (2) There is a compulsory quota to be legally met by each party. The percentage of women in the parliaments of 15 countries that had implemented a constitutional quota increased to 22.4% in their national parliamentary elections (Sancar, 2008, p. 179). Parties can also voluntarily apply quota without legal obligation as a result of their internal decision-making processes. This is the most common method in the world for applying quotas, in which the most effective method is when quotas are compulsorily implemented through law (quotaproject, n.d.).

The commonly used percentage in applied quota systems for increasing the representation of women in politics is 30%. This ratio is called *critical minority* or *critical mass*. Female parliamentary representation is automatically provided with a 30% presence rate through this application. There is also a *gender-neutral* quota that prevents either of the sexes from having an overwhelming majority. This prevents either sex from having more than a 60% representation rate (Dahlerup, 2005b, p. 151).

The most effective method seen to be used for increasing female representation rates and the number of female representatives is the quota system used in Scandinavian countries, Germany, and many other parts of the world (Elison, 1997, p. 199; Kolinsky, 1993, p. 142).

The parties present in Turkey's Parliament and the percentage of women as of November 2015 are shown in Table 4.

Table 4  
*Number of Representatives and Political Parties in Parliament as of November 2015 (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, n.d.)*

Distribution by Gender					
Party Name	Female		Male		Total
	Number	Rate (%)	Number	Rate (%)	
Justice and Development Party	34	10.73	283	89.27	317
People's Republican Party	21	15.67	113	84.33	134
People's Democratic Party	23	38.98	36	61.02	59
Nationalist Movement Party	3	7.5	37	92.5	40
Grand total	81	14.73	469	85.27	550

**Political parties.** These are one of the most effective institutions for women to be able to participate in the political sphere. Moreover, women are able to enter Parliament as a representative, and generally take part in politics through parties. The three strategies of political parties intended for the presence of women in the political sphere can be mentioned as (Lovenduski, 1993):

**Rhetorical strategy.** This strategy consists of declarations, and approaches intended to provide clarification in support of more women in a party and give them positive messages in political party campaigns, public elections, or propaganda-oriented documents.

**Strategies encouraging action.** In this strategy, there is more activity than discourse. Parties use this strategy both to support women and because they believe women are active in the political arena.

When implementing strategies that encourage action, starting with local governmental work and party membership can be more effective. Women should be encouraged to participate in local governments as city council members or party members (Ashwini &

Ganiger, 2013, pp. 1–6; Şahin, 2011). With this method, the barrier of women's lack in political interest and know-how will be reduced. Moreover, women can gain confidence with such memberships. In a study directed at female party members, women stated they felt they had gained confidence both at home and also in neighboring and other social environments; they felt important even with just a telephone call from the party (Geçgin, 2009, pp. 640–641). In other words, it is necessary to attract women to party activities, whether from the bottom rung or the echelons.

Also in this regard, women's branches pose great importance. In all democratic countries, most political parties tend to form women's branches or other units for women. These branches or units appear to perform as a booster for female participation in political life. Parties that keep to their word and create strong and effective women's branches make both women and the party strong. Parties and associations that have strong and active women's branches in a community are also more effective. It is possible to gather the function of women's branches into five main groups: (1) to ensure the support of women in the party, (2) to gain female members in the party, (3) to train women for top positions in the party and make them active, (4) to influence party policy, and (5) to establish bonds between other groups through women (Gelb, 1989, p. 62).

**Positive discrimination strategy.** Parties ensure that women take a more active role in the party and in parliament by placing a certain percentage of women from within their own structure on the boards, in the decision-making bodies, and on the candidate lists. The most broadcast examples of this are quotas. The application of quotas has been mentioned previously as a separate heading.

**Electoral system.** Increasing the percentage of female representatives in the electoral system is also very important. Electoral systems are generally divided into three parts: the electoral system based on the principal majority, electoral systems based on proportional representation, and the mixed electoral system. Of these systems, the most advantageous one for women is the system of proportional representation (Matland, 2005, p. 102). This system envisages that the candidates who participate in the election win seats when they receive a percentage of the votes. The proportional representation system eliminates the injustice of the representation of votes that are used this way most advantageously by establishing a ratio between the seats won for parliament with the ratio of the votes received.

**Public departments and policies.** It is necessary to make gender-sensitive government programs and set up departments to increase the political participation of women. There is currently only one public institution in Turkey that produces policies for increasing women's political participation, the General Directorate for the Status of Women (GDSW). The GDSW's National Action Plan of 1996 had



policies that were admired by NGOs for the equal participation of women in political decisions and for the equal representation of women in politics. However, while these policies took place on all official documents and have been supported by women's organizations, to this day they have hardly been able to find any application despite being kept on the agenda. From 2007 until 2012 this issue had not taken place in a strategic action plan; in 2012, it was glossed over, so to say, with the statement "Raising the level of awareness in order to increase the participation of women in politics and decision making up to the year of 2012 (Sancar, 2008, p. 180).

### **The New Generation of Religious Discourse Related to Women's Participation in Politics**

Religion and culture are mutually interactive. Sometimes religion is a part of culture and found within it; other times culture is perceived like religion. There are many practices and discourse that are, in fact, not from religion but stem from culture; however, the society assumes it is derived from religion. In Muslim countries such as Turkey, one of these subjects is the entry of women into politics and being a leader. It is necessary to change this traditional culture that claims to be religious yet arose from many traditions of religion; it is necessary to place a culture of equality into the political arena. The chapter of Nisa (women) from the Quran has been misinterpreted as a basis for the perception that woman cannot be leaders or politicians as shown in the 34<sup>th</sup> verse that describes "kavvam," or the concept that men have custodianship/guardianship over women. In this verse, kavvam is connected with matrimony and says a man assumes responsibility for the livelihood of his wife. So this verse is about the general principle of custody and has no connection with political authority or political responsibility. Moreover, other verses in the Quran make this political interpretation that identifies women below males invalid, perceiving a higher form that completes kavvam. This is because the 71<sup>st</sup> verse of the chapter Tawbah clearly expressed that believing women recognize guardianship, that believing men and woman are each other's custodians, and that they should enjoin goodness on each other and forbid evil. Again in the Quran, Chapter an-Naml mentions that the people of Sheba were led by a female ruler who had managed the community wisely (Görgülü, 2014, pp. 73–75, 79–80, 180–182).

### **Women NGOs**

Historically, the 1960's and 70's were intense years for women's movements and organizations in the world; these were the years that women started being active members in parties. The fruits of these movements began to harvest after the 1980's. The increase in women's political visibility was the most obvious result of this (Demir, 2015, p. 70).

Despite all ideological and ethnic differences, women NGOs generally provide a positive contribution to the political participation of women. The high representation

of women in Nordic countries does not just stem from the quotas applied by the Parties. Women's groups in movements and parties in these regions were quite effective as a result of this (Dahlerup, 2005a, p. 147). One thing that obliges parties to implement quotas is the existence of these women groups in NGOs and parties.

New topics have been added to party programs due to the pressure of women and NGOs in some countries, such as creating a new electoral system, giving new meaning to politics, and establishing new departments for women. Also, new staff positions for listening to citizen complaints on violations of equal opportunities have been created to ensure equal opportunity. Again, new public bodies are slowly being established for examining women's issues (Lovenduski, 1993, p. 1). KSGM and Women and Men Equal Opportunities Commission which is one of 18 commission of TBMM in Turkey are also among them.

Mobilizing the necessary mechanisms is essential for women to reach a critical mass in the political arena. The most important mechanisms for this are the electoral systems, quotas, political parties, governmental policies, regional and international obligations, media, and NGOs. These are factors that can help to increase the effectiveness of women in politics and produce strategies (International Gender Policy Network, n.d.). First of all, the consideration of low female representation as a problem is necessary in order to increase the political participation of women.

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