

The Representation of Women and Ethnic Minorities in Politics

Politics of Industrialized Societies

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*Advanced human development in democratic institutions of industrialized societies is highly dependent on the total participation, empowerment and inclusion of women and ethnic minorities in parliaments and legislative assemblies to influence decision making and implementation processes through high impact policy frameworks and equal opportunities. **Consequently, there is a dire need for greater political participation and empowerment of women and ethnic minorities to contribute to socio-cultural development by fomenting economic growth that is inclusive of diverse groups within specific demographic populations.***

Women and ethnic minority representation in parliaments in respective societies will effectively and efficiently ensure that there are stronger, more responsive yet relevant policy and legislative frameworks that encompasses critical issues of national and international importance such as: child care, welfare and protection, gender equality in the workplace which actively advocates for and promotes equal income and promotion for women, gender based violence, civil rights and anti-discrimination laws. In addition, it also must be emphasized that the concept of the political participation of women and ethnic minorities goes beyond exercising political rights through ballots or grassroots activism, political participation accentuates the empowerment of women and ethnic minorities to vie for and win public offices to represent the perceived 'voiceless' and other marginalized groups in societies through rigorous debates and actions that can improve the well-being of the specific demographic populations. Women and ethnic minorities are also pivotal to the political landscape of their countries because they are astute in lobbying for and promoting greater accountability and transparency systems in government's decision and actions to reduce perceived and actual corruption.

Despite the increasing roles of women and ethnic minorities in political participation and representation in industrialized societies, **women and ethnic minorities are still underrepresented in parliaments and legislative assemblies due to political, socio-cultural, economic and psychological factors** that can be explained by theories and other reliable, qualitative and quantitative evidence to substantiate the discussion of the thematic concern. Hence, before one can critically explore and discuss the crucial importance of the representation of women and ethnic minorities in parliaments as well as the measures used by industrialized countries to increase their representation in legislative assemblies, one has to first, carefully evaluate and analyse the contributing factors to the underrepresentation of these minority groups in parliaments as well as to properly define ethnic minorities in the context of demographic and political representation and participation.

Firstly, women are underrepresented in parliaments due to an institutionalized patriarchal system in political parties where gender is extremely critical to the selection process of candidates and women are less favourable in the selection process, due to their perceived traditional roles and responsibilities. This argument is reinforced in the commentary of Peter Northouse (2013) in his textbook, 'Introduction to Leadership: Theory and Practice' where he posits: "although the phenomena of female leaders have significantly increased globally, there is still an invisible barrier that is present that prevent women from rising to elite leadership positions within the political arena and this is called the glass ceiling.. domestic and child rearing burdens further prevent women from achieving elite leadership positions" (p. 354-355).

To further exacerbate this 'glass ceiling' phenomena that prevents women from rising to elite leadership positions, which eventually leads to their underrepresentation in parliaments, can be attributed to the fact that the political party system has been dominated and controlled by men who are motivated by evident gender biases and negative stereotypes to execute candidate selection or display support for particular candidates running for public office. To validate the following statement, evidence can be cited from a Senior Honours Research Thesis entitled, 'A Socio-cultural Analysis of Underrepresentation of Women in US State Legislatures' in which Meena Visvanathan (2012) argues:

"political ambitions embody the ethos of masculinity where state legislatures have taken a long time to include women and the policies that they typically support. Political parties have not fully integrated women.. fundraising networks for campaigns and other political institutions are operated by men and continued by controlled by men. These political institutions facilitates men's emergence into politics while suppressing women's emergence" (p.6-7).

Therefore, women's underrepresentation in parliaments can be attributed to institutional and socio-cultural factors in which women's roles in society are still viewed from traditionalist perspectives in which they are expected to relegate themselves to supporting roles of caring, nurturing and carrying out other domestic duties as well as the fact that leadership is has been perpetuated as a man's role because the political field demands fierce assertiveness and independence. As a result, parliamentary representation is still viewed as a man's social place in society and due to the consistent negative stereotypes of women's leadership styles, traditionalist perspectives and institutionalized patriarchy, women tend to a display a low level of political ambitions. Women's low political ambitions are best explained by Peter and Simon (2001) where they postulate if the social and political conditions are not right, women will only display static ambitions whereby there

will either not run for public office or remain in a state of complacency in a leadership position that is already held.

Moreover, the issue of underrepresentation of ethnic minorities should also be thoroughly explored and discussed by first, properly defining ethnic minorities in the context of demographics in industrialized countries. The United Nations Human Rights website (2015) defines:

“minorities as individuals with distinct national, ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity under the United Nations Declaration for Minorities, Article I. There is no internationally agreed definition of which groups constitute minorities. However, minorities can be described as a group of persons who are numerically inferior to the rest of a population in a state or it can be a group of persons in a numerical majority but have a non-dominant social position in a state and also minorities are marginalized social groups that are generally susceptible to limited access to opportunities that will enhance their well-being, discrimination and stigma. These include: people living with HIV/AIDS and other pandemic diseases, persons living with disabilities, persons from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual community (LGBT), persons belonging to political groups and persons with a particular ethnicity that is not dominant.”

Although there is no internationally agreed standard on defining and describing minorities, the US Census Bureau (2010) defines and categorizes ethnic minorities as people who are Blacks/persons of African heritage, Hispanics, Asians, Hawaiian, American Indian, Alaska Natives and other Pacific Islanders.

Henceforth, based on the definition and description of ethnic minorities in the context of demographics in industrialized countries and international law, it is safe to propose the argument that ethnic minorities are underrepresented in parliaments because there is an inherent bias or discrimination against these social groups rooted in the fact they might be the numerical minority and or the numerical majority but not the dominant social group within their respective states. The inherent bias or discrimination towards ethnic minorities is most evident in the case of France which is considered to be an industrialized country and is ranked as one of the permanent five (5) countries that is most powerful in terms of decision making and actions in the United Nations. In ‘The Washington Journal of Law and Policy: Volume 46- Emerging Ideas in Law’, Leland Ware (2015) deftly looks at ‘Colour Blind Racism in France’ where he states,

“For the past decades, discriminatory practices treat ethnic immigrants especially young men as second class citizens and impinge on their human rights, freedoms of movement and privacy. Racial and ethnic categories are not officially recognized in France. The French census does not disaggregate data by race or ethnicity, because French laws prohibit officials from doing so.”

The academic journal’s report and findings illustrated the irony of an industrialized country that is expected to uphold and maintain the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights in relation to rights and freedoms of ethnic minorities. The mere fact that they are unofficially acknowledged in the census of the country means that their representation in parliament, which is a symbol of decision making, policy and governance, will eventually be undermined or seriously jeopardized based on the grounds that the legislative and executive branches of the government in France pass laws and effect policies that are not friendly and or open

towards ethnic minorities. In addition, this serious undermining of their representation through discriminative laws and policies also infringes on their freedoms and rights especially the right to participate in public or civic life (voting, running for public office and increasing visibility through activism etc).

Since, there has been a meticulous evaluation of possible reasons for underrepresentation from women and ethnic minorities in parliaments, properly defining ethnic minorities and the many disadvantageous policies and laws meted out against them in the illustration of France, one can now clearly assess the crucial importance of having women and ethnic minorities being represented in parliaments. Women's representation in parliaments are greatly needed in parliaments because they will work more assiduously in allowing their voices to be heard on matters that have been otherwise 'pushed aside' out of the governance and decision making processes of a country and these matters are important because they are affecting the majority of social groups residing in a population.

Feminist writer and web blogger, Soraya Chemaly (2012) argues in her Huffington Post Blog entitled 'Women in Politics: Why We Need More Women in Office' that promoting an increase in women's political participation through running for public office will eventually lead to more women being actively involved in advocacy for gender-salient issues, women's health, reproductive rights, child rights, welfare, the economy. In addition, Chemaly argues that women are more responsive to their constituents because they are more focussed on co-operation than hierarchy. Chemaly also urges that more women should vote because the best way to speak out is through voting to push for policies, laws, initiatives and programmes that will be more favourable to their well-being. Chemaly's argument on the women's political participation and its benefits are further reinforced in the Guardian's article, 'Gender and Unity in the Labour Movement' (2015) where Deborah Orr comments:

"no modern day labour movement, political party or trade union cannot survive without women's support and representation. Women are apart of the largest public service union in the England and work with Jeremy Corbyn and his team on issues facing public service workers. Heather Wakefield has campaigned in the trade union and women's labour movement for over twenty-five (25) years for fair and equal pay, parental rights, women's representation and for public service workers to be properly valued."

Orr's commentary on women's activism in trade unions prove how important they would be to the political representation of their countries whereby policies would be responsive and relevant to the social groups that they are actively advocating for in parliaments.

Furthermore, women's representation in parliaments would be crucially important because they would demand more accountable and transparent systems of government's actions and decisions to reduce perceived and actual corruption that can hinder a country's development. Justin Esarey (2015) debates in his research paper entitled, 'Women's Representation, Accountability and Corruption in Democracies' that greater women's representation in politics is linked to lower levels of perceived corruption in government, according to a study conducted by (Dollar, Fishman and Gatti, 2001). He also noted that findings from a 2001 World Bank Study suggested that the policy world is zealous about including more women in political offices and bureaucratic offices because they act as an anti-corruption measure. These arguments corroborated by reliable evidence validates that greater political participation by women in parliaments can effectively drive the development of a country socially where marginalized groups are included in the policy making, decision making and consultation processes, economically whereby policies are

aimed at promoting equal income, promotion and employment for women and other disadvantaged social groups such as public service workers and politically whereby women do not only limit themselves to voting for candidates or relegate themselves to supporting roles of men but also they are empowered to run for public offices to create and effect various social changes and reforms to their respective countries.

On the other hand, it is also crucially important for ethnic minorities to be represented in parliaments because they will help to draft and effect efficient policy frameworks that will promote culturally diverse groups and other ethnic minorities' participation in public and civic life as well as a greater access to resources and opportunities that will enhance their self-efficacies, sustainable livelihoods and productivity. This statement can be substantiated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2010 publication entitled, 'Promoting Inclusive Parliaments: The Representation of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples in Parliament in which Dr. Oleh Protsyk states that minority representation in parliaments have helped to lobby for affirmative action towards indigenous peoples whereby more than twenty-seven per cent (27%) of countries being surveyed have introduced provisions that respect the customs and culture of indigenous peoples and minorities in respective countries such as New Zealand in which asides from English, the indigenous language Maori was given official recognition in the House of Representatives in 1985 and also, thirty-two per cent (32%) of countries involved minority groups and indigenous people in their consultations for decision making and policy implementation. The publication demonstrated that with the representation of ethnic minorities in parliaments issues such as affirmative action, cultural diversity, protection and upholding of human rights for minorities and integration of minorities in public and civic life. This will in turn help to empower the indigenous or ethnic minority population to achieve through advocacy for equal opportunities to be more productive individuals in their countries.

Lastly, although it has been agreed upon that women and ethnic minorities are underrepresented in parliaments, progress has also been made to include more women and ethnic minorities in legislative assemblies in industrialized countries through specific measures. Special measures for the inclusion of women in legislative assemblies include the use of gender quotas meanwhile special measures for the inclusion of ethnic minorities in legislative assemblies in industrialized countries include the use of reserved seats. Before one can look at the workability of gender quota to increase women's political participation in a selected industrialized country, the term gender quota has to be clearly defined.

According to the website, 'Quota Project: Global Database of Quotas for Women' (2014),

"quotas are systems in which are designed for women to constitute a certain number or percentage of a candidate's list, a parliamentary assembly, a committee or government. The core idea behind this system is that women are recruited into political positions and are not only the 'token few' in political life."

The gender quota system has had a significant impact on the political landscape of industrialized, European countries in which more women hold public offices in their legislative assemblies. To prove this argument, statistical evidence can be presented from the journal article, 'Increasing Women's Political Participation: New Trends in Gender Quotas in which Drude Dahlerup (2005) shows "women's political participation have increased by thirty-five point three per cent (35.3%) in Belgium by the year 2003 and thirty-seven per cent (37%) in Denmark between the consecutive years 2001-2005". He also notes some of the advantages of gender quotas in these industrialized countries whereby gender quotas

corroborate with the internationally recognized conventions on gender equality which recognize women's political representation and quotas also help to compensate women for the actual barriers that prevent them from having political seats. On the other hand, the disadvantages of gender quotas are that they are against gender equality, since women are given preference and women should not be elected by virtue of the fact of their gender but should be elected based on competence, skills and experiences.

However, special measures are also used to integrate ethnic minorities into legislative assemblies by industrialized countries. One of such special measures is reserved seats. Reserved seats have ethnic minorities to develop broad-based policies in legislative assemblies to reduce inter-cultural challenges and fuel the momentum of developmental potential of indigenous peoples and other ethnic minorities. In the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP's) publication (2010) entitled, 'Diversity in Legislative Assemblies: Listening to the Voices of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples', Elizabeth Prowley discusses that mechanisms in parliaments and legislative assemblies such as reserved seats, special elections and appointments guarantee the "voices of minorities" or participation on critical policy issues such as the recognition of public affairs as universal rights, affirmative action and inter-cultural dialogue as a means of mediating conflict.

In addition, personal interviews with Member of Parliaments from ethnic minority backgrounds have also been conducted in the publication to show the enormous impact that they have made through politics, and the presence of reserved seats, on other persons who are from ethnic minority groups including indigenous peoples. Congress woman in the United States, Mazie Hirono expressed "being a woman who is from an ethnic minority background has allowed me to champion the rights of ethnic minorities in the United States and to give back to my community." Meanwhile, Hone Harawira who is Member of Parliament in New Zealand who got his position through special measures for ethnic minorities also explained, "my identity as Maori and years of activism for Maori rights was a primary motivation for entering politics."

In concluding, despite women's and ethnic minorities' underrepresentation in parliaments, significant efforts and improvements have been made by industrialized countries to introduce special measures to increase the political participation of both women and ethnic minorities in their legislative assemblies. Women and ethnic minorities have contributed immensely to governance, decision making, relevant policy and legislative frameworks and responsive social programs and reforms that have promoted the economic and cultural development of their societies.

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