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Women's political careers: Where do leaders come from?

Rebecca Gordon, Shannon O'Connell, Sophia Fernandes, Keerti Rajagopalan & Rosie Frost

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Executive summary

Women's political leadership is important for ensuring that women's perspectives and experiences are included in political decision-making. Over the past 25 years, the overall percentage of women in parliaments has more than doubled, however the pace of progress has slowed in the past five years and women still make up less than a quarter of representatives in legislatures worldwide.

Whilst theories that explore women's political recruitment are well developed, researchers continue to argue for the need for more research on women's motivations for entering politics, and for the need to better understand what supports women's routes into political leadership roles. This report focuses on women's motivation to seek, and their preparation for, political leadership roles, through the following questions:

- How are women political leaders' motivations shaped?
- How do women prepare for political leadership?
- What factors support and hinder women's decision and ability to enter political leadership roles?
- How can programmes and policies effectively support women's entry into political leadership?

Through interviews with 25 women political leaders in 15 countries, it was clear that there is no singular motivation for women's political leadership; it is shaped by a combination of political issues and experiences and is often accompanied by a sense of duty or desire to improve the lives of others. These interviews also strengthened understanding of what factors enable women to prepare to build on their motivations for political leadership. All interviewees considered that political apprenticeships were vital in developing their skills for leadership and in broadening their understanding of the realities of political life. Family attitudes and support were also an important feature in enabling women to prepare for political leadership, whilst sponsorship and mentoring expanded their knowledge about the requirements of political roles, and their networks provided encouragement and inspiration. Finally, reflecting on yourself and your purpose in politics was considered an important part of preparing for leadership. However, three key barriers were highlighted: violence against women in politics, financing, and caring and domestic responsibilities.

In light of these findings, a two-pronged approach is needed from policymakers to support women leaders to act on their motivations and prepare for political life, providing opportunities for skill development and resources, and tackling the barriers that might hinder women's ability to use these. Given the commonalities among the perspectives shared in these interviews across contexts, there are a number of recommendations about programmes and policies that may effectively support women's entry into political leadership.

- **Political apprenticeships:** Political skills are often built through experience in politics or professional life. Policymakers should invest in opportunities for paid work experience for women interested in political leadership, particularly prioritising supporting women most under-represented in leadership positions and those who do not have existing access to networks that link them to these opportunities. Ensuring that these opportunities have flexibility embedded in them would also allow those with multiple responsibilities to benefit from them.
- **Targeted leadership development:** Political parties should invest in ongoing and embedded leadership development programmes which support the growth of women's political skills, encourage consideration of women's political purpose, and build networks and resources that women will need to successfully become candidates for election.[1]

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1. Reference to these types of programmes and to 'trainings' in this paper refer to engagements and opportunities that are specifically designed and tailor-made to advance the strategic positioning of women in competitive political contexts and that directly addresses barriers to both the entry and sustaining of women's political careers.

- **Family preparation and inclusion:** The development of preparation courses and networks to support the family members of aspiring political leaders could provide additional preparation, encouragement and resources needed that would assist women to act on their impetus for political leadership.
- **Sponsorship and mentorship:** Long-term sponsorship programmes are needed to de-mystify the political process and recognise that women often need to be asked more than once to run for leadership roles. Ongoing mentorship from a diverse range of people is important for addressing fears and concerns that motivated women may have, and for recognising that support and skill development needs to adapt to the different stages on the pathway to political leadership.
- **Targeted financial support and funding:** Governments and political parties should continue to reduce the cost of campaigning, but there also needs to be targeted and individual support designed to reach women who have the desire to enter leadership roles but face financial barriers to acting on this motivation. This financing needs to address the additional expenses incurred as a result of candidates' other responsibilities, such as money to help pay for additional childcare that would allow them to invest time in their political work.

These recommendations are not all-inclusive, and the need for wider systemic change is essential, particularly in addressing violence against women in politics and addressing gendered norms that influence women's responsibilities and limit their ability to participate in political life.

Acronyms

IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
MPs	Members of Parliament

Introduction

Women's political leadership is important for ensuring that women's perspectives and experiences are included in political decision-making (O'Neil & Domingo, 2016). Over the past 25 years, the overall percentage of women in parliaments has more than doubled, however the pace of progress has slowed in the past five years and women make up less than a quarter of representatives in legislatures worldwide (IPU, 2019).

Although the various factors that affect women's participation in politics vary in different contexts and are constantly shifting (Bullough et al., 2011), there are two theoretical perspectives used to understand women's pathways into political leadership, or women's political recruitment. The model of supply and demand considers supply side problems, such as a lack of qualified women willing to stand as candidates, and issues of demand, which might involve political parties choosing men as candidates over women (Lovenduski & Norris, 1995). However, it has been argued that focusing on supply side issues may reinforce narratives that blame the problem of women's under-representation on women themselves (Piscopo & Kenny, 2020). Indeed, feminist institutionalist accounts emphasise that gender differences in political ambitions are largely determined by political context and structural inequalities (Krook, 2010; Lovenduski, 2016).

Whilst theories to understand women's political recruitment are well developed, researchers continue to argue for the need for more research on women's motivations for entering politics. Existing research suggests that women are more motivated by a sense of duty to other people or their community in comparison to men, but the evidence is not conclusive (Cowper-Coles, 2020). Additionally, there have been calls to invest in better understanding of what it takes to support women's routes into political leadership roles more effectively (Domingo et al, 2015). To explore what motivates women to take on political leadership roles, how they prepare for running for office, how they get selected and win positions as political representatives, and how they survive the realities of political life, Westminster Foundation for Democracy interviewed 25 women political leaders from 15 countries. These leaders represent a range of experiences based on their length of time in politics, their involvement in local, devolved or national leadership, and their political ideologies, as well as diversity in terms of age and ethnicity.

This first paper focuses on women's motivation to seek, and their preparation for, political leadership roles through the following questions:

- How are women political leaders' motivations shaped?
- How do women prepare for political leadership?
- What factors support and hinder women's decision and ability to enter political leadership roles?
- How can programmes and policies effectively support women's entry into political leadership?

Key findings

- There is no singular motivation for women's political leadership, as it is shaped by a combination of political issues and experiences, often accompanied by a sense of duty or desire to improve the lives of others.
- Policymakers should invest in opportunities for "political apprenticeships" for women interested in political leadership, particularly prioritising supporting women most under-represented in leadership positions and those who do not have existing access to networks that link them to these opportunities.
- Political parties should invest in ongoing and embedded leadership development programmes which support the growth of women's political skills, encourage consideration of women's political purpose, and build networks and resources that women will need to successfully become candidates for election.
- The development of training and networks for aspiring politicians' family members could support additional preparation and encouragement that would assist women to act on their impetus for political leadership.
- Sponsorship and ongoing mentorship from a diverse range of people are important for addressing fears and concerns that women may have about running for leadership roles, and are essential for ensuring that training and preparation adapts to the different stages of the pathway to political leadership.
- Targeted financial support and funding should address the barriers women face in relation to campaign costs. However, it also needs to address the additional expenses incurred as a result of candidates' caring and domestic responsibilities, such as money to help pay for additional childcare to allow a candidate to invest time in their political work.

How are women political leaders' motivations shaped?

Previous research has demonstrated that women are less interested - and less active – in politics than men. However, this is widely considered to be due to political contexts that disincentivise women's political participation, rather than different levels of motivation towards political leadership. A recent comprehensive review of women's political leadership called for the need for research to provide a more holistic account of how women are motivated to enter politics (Cowper-Coles, 2020). In our interviews, there were three core areas that had motivated women to enter political leadership: having a politically involved or engaged family, particular political issues or experiences and activism, and a desire to 'make the world a better place'.

Politically involved or engaged family

Home environments, or spaces for 'political immersion', are highly significant factors in enabling women's political leadership (Tadros, 2014: 6), particularly where other family members are involved in politics. Those interviewed for this report explained that a politically active family home was pivotal in providing women with early understandings of, and motivations for, entering political leadership. In 10 out of 25 interviews, women mentioned that they had family members who were in politics, or family that were politically engaged.

> I was brought up in a political household. My parents were active within the [Political party]. My dad had been involved in civil rights, and my mum went into elective politics in her 50s. So, I suppose that was just always a culture of public service and getting involved.

Firstly, many women interviewed noted the role that a family member being a political leader had on shaping their own motivations for political leadership. A politically active family can inspire women to enter politics, and reinforce ideas around values, duties and a responsibility towards others (Prindeville, 2002). Having a family member in politics was also referenced as having de-mystified the process, as it gave women the knowledge needed to understand how to successfully prepare for and enter political life as watching how family members deal with people and situations as part of their political role can support the development of skills needed for leadership. The ability to exchange ideas and stories with political leaders in the family was

also noted as supporting women's familiarity with the challenges faced in political leadership roles. Additionally, having family members in politics was also acknowledged as demonstrating the potential of political leadership to effect change, and for three of those interviewed, the positive impact that their family member had through their leadership role was referred to as directly inspiring their involvement in politics.

> My father was a politician. So, when I was a little girl, I just thought "I'm going to be a politician like my dad."… it occupied a lot of my young life.
>
> *Hon. Millie Grace Akoth Odhiambo MP, Kenya*

A family name can give women recognition beyond their own achievements and can mean that they are trusted and respected by constituents based on family members' previous contributions (Pai, 2012). In this way, family connections may provide a profile that enables women to act on their motivations and seek office, particularly in contexts where gendered norms represent significant barriers to women's political leadership (Baturo & Gray, 2018; Corbett & Liki, 2014). However, rather than observing the explicit impact of family connections on their ability to successfully attain a political leadership role, one interviewee noted that a family member providing them with support and encouraging them to get involved strengthened their confidence and inspiration to run for office.

> I remember most Saturdays going to visit my grandparents and there'd always be a political discussion going on, not so much about politics, but about current affairs. My grandfather, who was from a mining valley in South Wales, had very strong views. It was just being in that environment I guess.
>
> *Nickie Aiken MP, United Kingdom*

One of the most commonly noted factors was not related to family having held political office themselves, but through their family being politically engaged in other ways. Women mentioned the importance of being exposed to the culture and value of public service, and to political debates and discussions. This is in line with previous research that explored how women entered political systems that had previously low levels of representation and noted how political discussions in the household from an early age equipped women with the skills and motivations for political leadership (Spark, Cox & Corbett, 2018).

Overall, seeing family members in leadership roles, whether political or otherwise, was a significant factor in motivating women to become political leaders, because of the exposure it gave them to the potential impact that leadership could have on their community, and because it had generated understanding of the importance of public service.

> I saw him [my father] live and breathe community action and offer a range of services to the community that didn't exist... In 2014, I lost my father... that was really significant for me because I got into politics because of him.

Political issues or experiences

Women interviewed often referred to particular political issues that had motivated them to engage in leadership. These issues varied hugely, from anti-racist campaigning, to wanting to protect the world from a nuclear war, to a desire to counter Margaret Thatcher's approach to trade unions. However, the way in which political issues or experiences motivated women to take up political leadership was well summarised as frustration at those currently in power.

> I was frustrated that some people are not doing the things that they are supposed to be doing, and that's what drove me to go into politics.

Women's understanding and personal experience of the way in which leadership played a crucial role in taking action on issues that concerned them was important for shaping their political motivations. Many of those interviewed referred to their previous successful experiences in political mobilisation in the community as giving them a foundation from which to enter other political leadership roles. Indeed, other studies have shown that organising around women's issues in civil society can provide experience and confidence for women's future political leadership (O'Neil & Plank, 2015). In some cases, this was because their experience had given them strong insights into the power of what they might be able to achieve through political leadership.

> Most of my work was on a voluntary basis... [When my party elected me and chose me to be their representative] what encouraged me was my role within the community and how I could help the community.

Although not always explicitly stated, there were strong undertones of motivation coming from a sense of attachment or duty, either to communities that women were part of, or to a wider project or idea. Other interviewees made this linkage more explicitly, citing political issues or experiences that they knew they had direct capacity to contribute to, which led to their desire to stand for office. This is in line with studies which find that women are more interested in entering politics due to certain issues or a feeling of duty towards a community or group (Kamlongera, 2008). Therefore, motivation coming from a particular political issue or experience, and women's existing knowledge of the power of political leadership to be able to effect change, often combined with their sense of duty or understanding of their unique capacity to have an impact in this area.

> I found it was an opportunity to give back to the community that went through quite a lot of hardship of war … I was looking at how an experience that was so painful can become an opportunity to move forward and help others to move forward.
>
> *Mimoza Kusari-Lila, MP and Party Leader, Kosovo*

'Making the world a better place'

> The reason I went into politics was because I wanted to help improve people's lives… I care deeply about wanting to improve the lives of people who need it most, and I care deeply about eradicating poverty.
>
> *Delyth Jewell MS, Wales*

For others the sense of duty was not related directly to a particular issue or cause, but to a broader sense of wanting to make the world a better place. Men and women candidates have largely similar reasons for running for office or entering politics. Their main motivation is to effect change, and they see political leadership as a way through which to achieve this (Cowper-Coles, 2020). In this research a desire to improve the world around them was mentioned explicitly in 12 out of 25 interviews as being a key motivation for women's political leadership.

Preparing for politics: what factors support women's decision and ability to enter political leadership roles?

Interviewees presented a myriad of motivations for women's political leadership, particularly coming from women's understanding of the potential of their leadership to effect change. However, women also reflected upon how they were able to build on these motivations to make the decision to take on political leadership roles. Previous research has demonstrated that education, professional experience and networks can prepare people to become leaders, but it is important to think beyond the existence of these resources and consider how they are utilised by women on their pathway into political leadership (Corbett, 2019). Interviewees explained how they prepared for political leadership through political apprenticeships, family support, sponsorship and mentorship, education and 'knowing yourself and your purpose.'

Political apprenticeships

Frequently mentioned was the importance of "political apprenticeships" or work experience as having provided women with the skills and expertise required for their political leadership roles. As others have argued, women need political skills and judgement to win elections and have substantive influence. Political skills include communication and interpersonal skills, which are not easily taught (O'Neil & Domingo, 2016) and often the knowledge of what skills are particularly relevant for political leadership is not widespread. Five out of the 25 interviewees mentioned the research they undertook, to understand what would be required of them in political leadership roles, as an essential part of their preparation. However, the main skill development that supported women's preparation for leadership came from their work experience.

> Read widely, especially on governance issues. Listen to other politicians who have been there, not just within your country, but also from other countries, get experiences from different areas and different people.
>
> *Hon. Renee Mayaka, County Assembly Member, Kenya*

In ten of the interviews, women referred to the importance of their experience working in politics, such as for MPs or ministers. This gave women an insight into what the realities of political leadership would be, what skills were needed and how they would need to be utilised.

> I held numerous roles during in the time I worked in [an MP's] office. So, I got the full experience. And that definitely stood me in good stead in terms of being an MP in the future.

It also provided women with the opportunity to develop the skills required to make a decision to run for political office, and that would support them if they succeeded in getting elected. For example, previous research has found that women leaders in other contexts noted qualities such as self-assurance and the recognition of the value of their work as being qualities that they shared with male leaders (Chhoeun et al., 2008). One interviewee highlighted how self-assurance was developed from working closely with political leaders and decision-makers.

> I was Special Adviser to John MacGregor when he was the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Leader of the House of Commons and Secretary of State for Transport. During this time, I was fortunate enough to gain insight into the workings of Government and an in-depth knowledge of a range of policy issues.
>
> *Dame Eleanor Laing MP, United Kingdom*

Political parties are noted to be a major barrier to women's entry in politics, as they often do not do enough to recruit and support women (Cowper-Coles, 2020). Gender power relations shape interactions and processes that take place within political parties and feminist institutionalist research has shown that these influence political recruitment processes; men have more access to opportunities and resources within party organisations (Kenny & Verge, 2016). However, experience working or volunteering within political parties was noted to be an important factor that supported fifteen of those interviewed on their pathway into leadership. Having this experience demonstrated women's loyalty, support and abilities within the party, enabling them to build up important organisational resources, such as access to those making the decisions about candidate selection. It also allowed them to develop networks that can support their bid for political office.

> I volunteered for the Orange Democratic Movement Party, doing youth activities and going to party offices for meetings. Prior to the 2017 election I joined the presidential campaign team... and while doing that the party announced that they were taking applications...So I applied for that.
>
> **Hon. Renee Mayaka, County Assembly Member, Kenya**

Women's experiences of working closely with political leaders and within political parties not only provided important skills, networks and political resources that prepared women to act on their motivations for leadership (Verge & Claveria, 2016), but also strengthened their understanding of the impact of political leadership in reality from their proximity to 'the political kitchen'.

> My first job was in the Ukrainian Republican Party. Probably from this point, my path has been pre-determined as I've been working with politicians for 26 years now. I've been so close to the political kitchen.
>
> **Oksana Syroyid, Party Leader, Ukraine**

For many, political apprenticeships represented the first step on the ladder to leadership because of the doors they opened to opportunities to run for elected office. In some respects, this raises interesting questions about politicians' experience prior to running for office. There is an ongoing criticism of 'career politicians' whose experience has predominantly been in the political sphere. Indeed, many interviewees themselves stated that they felt work experience outside of politics was important in developing their skill set. However, particularly because there are fewer women in politics, it is vital that those interested in leadership are given the space to train and gain confidence in this area and working with political parties represents an important avenue through which this can be developed.

Linked to the experience of working within political parties, there is some evidence that suggests that local government is more accessible to women, and therefore provides an important route into national-level political leadership (Chin, 2004; Bitušíková, 2005). However, there is also evidence to the contrary (Cowper-Coles, 2020). Five of the women interviewed reflected on the importance of their experience in local politics prior to running for national politics as having provided insight into holding positions of responsibility. These situations gave women tangible experience of different aspects of leadership such as oversight of budgets. This arguably gave them greater credibility in their campaigns to take on additional duties in other elected positions.

> I was elected [for council] and I didn't look back. I became a spokesperson for education the day after I was elected. So, I was lucky to immediately move into a position of responsibility.

Although this does not directly challenge the fact that there is no conclusive evidence that local government acts as a place of entry for women in politics (Cowper-Coles, 2020), it does shed light on how experience in local politics can enable women to prepare for national-level political leadership roles and expands their credibility in how they might be able to communicate this preparedness to voters with specific examples.

> I went on the Jo Cox 'Women in Leadership' course. To us as women, it gave us the real practical steps of understanding how you advance yourself.

Apprenticeships in the form of formal political party leadership development programmes were considered to be an important part of women's preparations for political leadership. Three interviewees noted having access to a tailored political leadership training programme through their party. Those who participated in such programmes referred to them as being essential in making women aware of the system they wanted to enter and the skills they needed to develop in order to successfully navigate it. It also was considered to be a way of creating networks of support from the outset.

Other leadership roles related to politics were mentioned in seven interviews as providing the skills necessary to understand what it takes to run for office. Student activism was a common route, singled out by five interviewees, through which they learnt political and leadership skills and built a profile (Tadros, 2014). It was also noted as having provided them with experience in elections, which was valuable in strengthening their knowledge about what their motivation to run for office would look like in reality, as well as campaigning strategies and networks to draw upon in future.

> Whilst studying Law at Edinburgh University, I fought and won an election to become the first female President of the Edinburgh Student's Union. It was a challenging election and one that confirmed my passion for pursuing democracy.
>
> *Dame Eleanor Laing MP, United Kingdom*

Previous experience, or involvement in activism is often noted as an important part of both male and female politicians' backgrounds (Fawcett Society, 2018). Organising around shared interests, and having experience of creating policies, programmes and collective action increases people's political power. This is something that has been noted in feminist organising (Htun & Weldon, 2012), but was clearly evidenced by interviewees' experiences in student politics as well.

For many, their work experience outside of politics was also pertinent to their skill development that prepared them for political leadership. There is some evidence that women are more likely to enter politics having worked in the public sector, non-profit sector or civil society activism compared to men, particularly in the education sector (Schwindt-Bayer, 2011).

Primarily this work experience is considered to enable women's pathway into political leadership because they develop skills, build constituencies and gain the confidence to enter politics (O'Neil & Plank, 2015; WomenKind, 2016). However, these factors were not always noted, and in one case an interviewee explained how public sector work supported her preparation for political leadership because the flexibility it provided enabled her to combine work and political responsibility.

> I used to work in further education and managed my own time. This meant I could get involved in local politics. And it suited the college to have somebody in the council for their own political reasons...Every individual will have their own circumstances which work in favour or against them.
>
> *Liz Saville-Roberts MP, United Kingdom*

Overall, this research found that political apprenticeships, whether directly working for existing political leaders, involvement in political parties and local politics or prior experience in leadership roles and activism were fundamental factors that support women's entry into political leadership positions (Cowper-Coles, 2020). However, these opportunities are not available to all; as interviewees noted, sometimes their proximity to these political experiences was as a result of chance, because of networks, because of their pre-existing skillset or previous educational opportunities. There therefore needs to be more targeted and wide-ranging opportunities for women to gain political experience. Political parties should invest in leadership development programmes and paid opportunities for experience for women interested in political leadership and should prioritise supporting women most under-represented in leadership positions in their organisation.

Family support

Supportive family attitudes and environments are also necessary factors in enabling and preparing women to enter politics (Fawcett Society, 2018). Previous research has shown that families play particularly important roles in supporting politically active women in contexts where their responsibilities transgress ideas about what women should do (O'Neil & Domingo, 2016). Those interviewed referred to the experience and skills that family had supported them to develop, and how integral these were to their ability to enter and to succeed in political leadership. In particular, seven interviewees referred to the confidence that their families had given them through their belief in their ability to become a political leader, or through opening up opportunities for them to learn more about the communities and the world around them.

> I didn't make that decision alone. With other jobs if I got it, I'd go and do it and then let my friends and family know. But in this case, I felt I had to have their consent and blessing as I knew this was going to be like no other job. Also having people that believed in you who are willing to support you, backed you makes all the difference.
>
> **_Rushanara Ali MP, United Kingdom_**

However, in addition to political skills that families enabled and encouraged women to develop, the importance of practical support was consistently noted by interviewees. For example, having confidence in being able to enter a campaign required knowing that family members would, and could, step in to take over childcare or other responsibilities in the household.

> You have got to have a supportive partner no matter what your gender or sexuality, they've got to be supportive of what you're doing, and they've got to be equally willing to sacrifice quite a bit.
>
> **_Nickie Aiken MP, United Kingdom_**

As noted, taking on a leadership role not only increases women's responsibility, but also that of those around them, meaning that preparation for women's families and support systems is necessary in enabling women's potential to take leadership roles. There is limited literature on the support available for families of political leaders (Tadros, 2014), but increased recognition of the importance of political parties and institutions facilitating and supporting political leaders' families is essential. The development of preparation courses for family members, and of networks for politicians' families, could provide additional training and encouragement that would better enable women to act on their impetus for political leadership.

Sponsorship and mentorship

Sponsorship and mentorship are linked concepts, with both creating and reinforcing connections within a particular area. Sponsors are those already in existing leadership positions who are able to highlight promising candidates and who are pivotal in encouraging and supporting them to stand for leadership roles.

> The party leader asked me if I would stand for election and encouraged me and quite a few other folks in the party had asked me as well.
>
> **_Hannah Bardell MP, United Kingdom_**

In this research, sponsors were often a strong feature in encouraging women to take action on their motivation to run for office. For many, sponsorship from existing politicians gave them courage and confidence in their ability which was important in their pathway into political leadership, as well as facilitating their access to these opportunities. Two of those interviewed emphasised how sponsorship needed to be consistent and persistent, as they were hesitant to act on their sponsors' encouragement to 'throw their hat in the ring' the first time that they were asked. Additionally, being asked more than once, and having the support of multiple sponsors was considered to be of paramount importance in providing women with the certainty that their leadership was needed and desired.

> I'd been asked to stand by a long-standing and greatly respected councillor in this area, Councillor Selwyn Griffiths... I think that was part of it... Having people asking me to do it again. Pushing myself forward made me a bit uncomfortable. Being asked gave me some sort of certainty that somebody had the confidence in me to do it.
>
> *Liz Saville-Roberts MP, United Kingdom*

Mentorship is often considered to act as a 'mirror', enabling individuals to see themselves more clearly. Some studies have found that women role models can inspire more women to run for political office (Cowper-Coles, 2020). However, there are also studies that do not find any impact of women political role models, or that it can discourage women's political leadership, perhaps due to evidence of gendered backlash or abuse (Liu, 2018). In two interviews, women mentioned how admiration for political role models had motivated them to get involved in politics; notably, interviewees did not solely focus on women role models, and four of those interviewed specifically noted the importance of mentorship from male political leaders in supporting their desire for leadership.

> I believed in the leadership of the Honourable Derek Taylor. I got involved in a campaign and began serving in the party in support of his leadership... That is really how I got involved.
>
> *Sharlene Cartwright-Robinson, Former Premier, Turks and Caicos Islands*

The benefits of a political apprenticeship in preparing women for the realities of leadership was also noted as being available through strong mentoring opportunities, particularly with existing women politicians. For those who did not have familial links to politics, nor had opportunities to work in politics, mentorship provided the first opportunity to get an insight into the process of candidate selection and campaigns and helped women to build up resources they would need to succeed, such as networks. Mentoring that begins well before candidate selection and vetting was considered to be important in ensuring that women who are interested in leadership do not drop out before this stage.

> I've created a women's mentoring project to help support women through the stage before our candidate selection .... A lot of women consider this a barrier: 'I'll never pass vetting' ... The mentoring really aims to break down that the fear of vetting. Then a lot of people are saying, 'I don't really know how to be a candidate' so mentoring continues.

One of the important implications of understanding the role of sponsorship and mentorship in supporting women to act on their motivations for political leadership is to acknowledge that many women need to be asked more than once to run for office, and there needs to be ongoing and dedicated involvement from multiple people to discuss potential fears, questions and concerns that interested women may have. However, sponsorship alone, which often operates in the form of political recruitment, or 'talent spotting', is insufficient to ensure that women are able to prepare for political life; it is important that mentorship is provided as an ongoing process starting long before the point of candidate selection, focused on de-mystifying the political process and supporting women to strengthen the required skill set.

Education

Women's education was referred to both in explaining how their motivations for political leadership were supported and in terms of its importance for preparing for these roles. Access to education is an important foundation for both skills and profile, required as a basis for women to have the confidence to see themselves as potential leaders, and to be seen as credible by others (O'Neil & Domingo, 2016). Previous research noted that education can be a mark of status and prestige that can be leveraged to achieve political goals (Spark, Cox & Corbett, 2018) and that women in high-level leadership tend to be those with higher levels of education and experience (Bauer & Okpotor, 2013).

> I had always been quite passionate about environmental issues and social justice issues ... I ran as ethical and environmental officer for my student union to try and challenge some of these issues... I did things like 'People and Planet' and 'Stop the War' at the time.

Interviewees did refer to education as providing the practical skills for legislative work. However, this was less commonly noted than in previous studies, perhaps because the majority of those interviewed had accessed or been involved in higher education themselves. Generally, the benefit of education was noted by interviewees in combination with the experiences it afforded them to engage with political issues, or in relation to student politics, as mentioned above.

'Know yourself' and 'know your purpose'

Advice from those interviewed on how women can prepare for political life strongly acknowledged the importance of 'knowing yourself' and 'knowing your purpose'. Some studies have highlighted the need for women aspiring to political offices to have access to domestic and international experts on key issues and support in building a personal political brand and profile (O'Neil & Plank, 2015). Most interviewees did not directly refer to their own engagement with experts or policymakers, instead focusing on the importance of self-reflection and the need to think carefully about whether taking on a political leadership role in order to achieve their broader purpose was something they felt able to do.

> You've got to really know yourself, really work out whether this is what you want to do and if you've got the stomach for it.
>
> **_Rushanara Ali MP, United Kingdom_**

Thinking carefully about strategic objectives and motivations for leadership was also mentioned as being a vital part of preparation. 'Knowing yourself' and 'knowing your purpose' was referenced in thirteen of the interviews, with one interviewee reflecting on how they had been afforded the space to engage with these ideas in depth as part of creating a roadmap during a political leadership development programme, whilst another detailed how she had entered political leadership with three clear objectives.

> You need to be clear about what it is you want to achieve. I had my three Bs: Babies, Banks and Brussels...If I can do these three things, I'll 'die happy'... although lots of other things come up along the way!
>
> **_Andrea Leadsom MP, United Kingdom_**

Although many leadership development programmes include activities that encourage aspiring political leaders to reflect on their purpose, women's experiences from these interviews suggest that it should be systematically embedded, and that women leaders should have the opportunity to continually reflect and engage with mentors about these topics.

What factors hinder women's decision and ability to enter political leadership roles?

In spite of supportive factors that enabled women to prepare for political leadership, there were three main areas noted by interviewees as hindering their ability to act on their motivation and desire for political leadership: violence and abuse, financial barriers, and caring and domestic responsibilities.

Violence against women in politics

Violence and abuse towards women in politics was mentioned in all interviews, even if it was not directly as a factor that influenced their decision to enter political leadership roles. Although sobering, this is unsurprising, as the most recent figures show that there is an upward trend of reported violations against parliamentarians, with women MPs suffering disproportionately (IPU, 2020). This issue is growing in visibility and the abuse, threats and violence directed towards women in politics are increasingly a reason why women do not want to enter politics or why they are leaving it (Krook, 2020; Bigio & Vogelstein, 2020; Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2019).

> Watching [an MP] and what she had to go through definitely make me think quite early on that I didn't want to do this... I would definitely say it took its toll because a lot of the time would be spent protecting her from seeing the abuse. So I would see the abuse.

Violence against women in politics is a barrier to all women who are motivated to enter political leadership roles. However, interviews illustrated the gendered and racialised dimensions of abuse. One recent study found that in the run up to the 2017 general election in the UK, 45% of all abusive tweets towards women MPs were aimed at Diane Abbott, Britain's first Black female MP. This same study found that the other Black and Asian MPs included in the study also received 35% more abusive tweets than white women MPs (Amnesty International, 2017). This high level of gendered and racialised abuse towards women political leaders arguably affects women's desire to partake in politics. Four interviewees explicitly mentioned how violence and abuse had made them question acting on their motivation for leadership.

Unfortunately, there is not a lot of information on how to address this barrier (Cowper-Coles, 2020). There has been some legislative change around the world with laws developed to specifically address political violence, including in Bolivia, Mexico and Peru. Laws that recognise the multiple dimensions of violence against women in politics are an important starting point in developing clear language and regulations to tackle violence against women in politics (Biroli, 2018). However, as we explore in more detail in *Women's Political Careers: Leadership in Practice* there are certain approaches that women politicians recommend for dealing with the abuse and violence they face.

Financial barriers

Moving from motivation for political leadership to taking office is restricted by financial capability and whether women have resources necessary for political influence. This includes whether they have financial security that enables them to take time off work for campaigning, money to fund campaigns or to pay for childcare so they can take on additional responsibilities outside of the home to build up the required political skills for leadership (O'Neil & Domingo, 2015). This is particularly likely to act as a barrier for women from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

> When you stand back and look at going into politics, you're making yourself very vulnerable financially unless you have financial security behind you.
>
> *Liz Saville-Roberts MP, United Kingdom*

Bernhard, Shames & Langan Teele (2020) argue that household income, breadwinning responsibilities and household composition are interlocking obstacles to women's political leadership. Income constraints refer to the fact that women with lower household income are less likely to be able to invest time in political service.

> I went to university and studied political science, and at the end of it, for various personal reasons, I wanted to earn some money because my early childhood was very financially deprived. I wanted the security of earning money.
>
> **Andrea Leadsom MP, United Kingdom**

Breadwinner constraint relates to women's earning responsibilities, and if they are responsible for a larger proportion of household income, they will be less likely to run for office. Additionally, household composition - whether women have support from other earners, or have dependants reliant on their income - represents a barrier to entering political leadership roles. The financial concerns about running for office were mentioned directly by three interviewees, who explained how concerns about financial insecurity and costs of entering politics initially influenced their decision about whether to stand for office.

Understanding the political economy of the household is key to bridging the gap between women's nascent and expressive political ambition. More holistically, wider system change in relation to economic and social security is essential to reducing gendered gaps in leadership, but political parties and the state can take active steps in reducing this barrier through reducing the cost of campaigning and through regulating and introducing limits on campaign funding (Krook & Norris, 2014).

However, as we explore in more detail in *Women's Political Careers: Leadership in Practice*, there also needs to be targeted and individual support designed to reach women who have the motivation to enter leadership roles but face financial barriers to acting on this motivation. This financing needs to go beyond campaigning, and also consider the additional costs that women face due to their involvement in politics. Some interviewees emphasised the importance of additional financial support for campaigning to support a candidates' family responsibilities, such as money to help pay for additional childcare that would allow a candidate to invest the necessary time in their political work.

Caring and domestic responsibilities

An ongoing barrier for women entering politics is balancing this role with the caring and domestic responsibilities which tend to fall upon women (Bennett & Tang, 2009; Teele et al., 2018; Thomas & Bittner, 2017). In one interview, it was others' perception of their family responsibilities that meant there were challenges women had to overcome in terms of attitudes towards their leadership and practical challenges of managing multiple responsibilities.

> I was pregnant with my daughter when I finally got selected for a seat. I felt professionally qualified and wanted to contribute to shaping my campaign, but every time I came up with ideas, I would hear things like 'you don't need to worry about this, you can go home to your kids'.

In other cases, these responsibilities led to women delaying their entry into politics, cognisant of the difficulties that would come with balancing these roles. This is supported by research that finds that women in politics are more likely to be single or divorced than men (Conteh, 2018; Schwindt-Bayer, 2011), to have fewer or no children (Rosenbluth et al., 2015; Campbell & Childs, 2014), or to only enter politics once their children are older.

> I had the local party saying to me, you should stand for council, you should stand for parliament. I remember saying to one of my colleagues 'come and ask me when my youngest starts school, I just can't cope at the moment'.

However, the majority of those interviewed had not been deterred in their pursuit of political leadership as a result of their caring and domestic responsibilities. Indeed, one candidate even shared how she had given birth the day of candidate selection, whilst another noted being eight months pregnant during an election campaign. In spite of this, even after the decision to take political leadership roles has occurred, it is clear that these barriers continue and are most likely to affect women without childcare support. For example, one interviewee explained how it was not possible to have a place in the nursery in Westminster temporarily, and so for those who live outside of London, this is not a helpful resource.

However, interviewees also had some perspectives on how to prepare and mitigate against some of these barriers, to support their pathway to political leadership. One example was carefully selecting the right area to represent. Although this would not be a feasible option for many women, there was an overarching message about the importance of considering your responsibilities and how you can 'make it work for you'. One interviewee mentioned Margaret Thatcher's advice to her to be selected in a London seat, in order to balance constituency and familial responsibilities; those in other contexts also mentioned the importance that your seat and commute can have on your day-to-day political life, which requires forward planning and political party support.

Conclusion

Overall, this research has provided an overview of women's motivations for entering politics as an intricate combination of being inspired by particular political issues or experiences, women's understanding and knowledge of the power of political leadership to effect change, and a sense of duty or desire to improve the lives of those around them.

This data also strengthens the understanding of what factors enable women to prepare to build on their motivations for political leadership and how they accrue and make use of their resources and experiences for these roles. All interviewees considered that political apprenticeships were vital in building up their skills for leadership and in broadening their understanding of the realities of political life. Family attitudes and support were also an important feature in enabling women to prepare for political leadership, whilst mentoring expanded their knowledge about the requirements of political roles, grew their networks, and provided encouragement and inspiration. Finally, the importance of reflecting on yourself and your purpose in politics was a key aspect of preparing for leadership. However, women leaders are situated in particular contexts, and as the barriers demonstrate, may not always be able to, or may not wish to, act on their motivation or preparation to take up leadership roles.

Therefore, a two-pronged approach is needed from policymakers to support women leaders to act on their motivations and prepare for political life: providing opportunities for skill development and resources, and tackling the barriers that might hinder women's ability to use these. Given the commonalities among the perspectives shared in these interviews across contexts, there are a number of recommendations about programmes and policies that can effectively support women's entry into political leadership.

- **Political apprenticeships:** Women need political skills to be influential. These are often built through experience in politics or professional life. Policymakers should invest in opportunities for paid work experience for women interested in political leadership, particularly prioritising supporting women most under-represented in leadership positions and those who do not have existing access to networks that link them to these opportunities. Ensuring that these opportunities have flexibility embedded in them would also allow those with multiple responsibilities to benefit from them.
- **Targeted leadership development:** Political parties should invest in ongoing and embedded leadership development programmes which support the growth of women's political skills, encourage self-reflection and consideration of women's political purpose, and build networks and resources that they will need to successfully become candidates for election.
- **Family preparation and inclusion:** The development of preparation courses and networks to support the family members of aspiring political leaders could provide additional preparation, encouragement and resources that would enable women to act on their impetus for political leadership.
Sponsorship and mentorship: Long-term mentorship programmes are needed to de-mystify the political process and sponsorship must recognise that women often need to be asked more than once to run for leadership roles. Ongoing mentorship from a diverse range of people is important for addressing fears and concerns that motivated women may have and in recognising that mentorship needs to adapt to the different stages of the pathway to political leadership.
- **Targeted financial support and funding:** Governments and political parties should continue to reduce the cost of campaigning, but there also needs to be targeted and individual support designed to reach women who have the desire to enter leadership roles but face financial barriers in acting on this motivation. This financing needs to address the additional expenses incurred as a result of candidates' other responsibilities, such as money to help pay for additional childcare that would allow them to invest time in their political work.

These recommendations are not all-inclusive, and the need for wider systemic change is essential, particularly in addressing violence against women in politics and addressing gendered norms that influence women's responsibilities and limit their ability to participate in political life.

If you are interested in this report, please also see: *Women's Political Careers: Leadership in Practice*, our second report from this research which provides more information on how women adapt to the realities of political life

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