Transforming women's selection processes within political parties

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**Picture above: Hon. Roseby Gadama of Malawi addresses the conference in London.
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**Picture on page 3:Delegates work together to outline the problems hindering women's leadership in political parties and propose concrete solutions.
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Summary of Women Lead conference February 2024, London

In February 2024, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and the UK political parties hosted an expert conference to shine light on political party practices that identify and nurture women candidates and support them on to positions of party leadership.

Political leaders representing parties from over twenty countries in Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean came together to showcase and learn about reforms and innovations that political parties can adopt to better support women candidates.

During the conference, political parties and experts working in the field of democracy support made 85 pledges to take specific action to bring about positive change for women in politics.

This report highlights the debates and recommendations made by political leaders on how political parties can better identify, nurture, promote, and expand female talent, with a specific focus on candidate recruitment, support, and selection.

In most countries, entry into formal politics is through political parties. They are essential for gaining the credibility, experience and networks needed to become a candidate for public office.

At best, parties are where women develop their political aspirations, learn about political processes from mentors, and feel part of their local organisations.

At worst, a masculinised culture that fosters discrimination and intimidation is the key barrier that curtails women from progressing in politics.

Why candidate selection processes are important

Political parties play a fundamental role in participatory democracies and candidate recruitment is one of the most important things they do. How well political parties recruit, prepare, and select candidates directly affects how well democratic institutions, such as parliaments and governments, are able to perform.

Political parties thereby determine how truly representative governing bodies can be. Moreover, in doing so, they inherently affect whether people's needs guide decision making. Gaps in representation are linked to lower levels of public trust.

Across the globe, the underrepresentation of women has a direct impact on the quality of governance. What is more, how candidates are recruited and selected reflects the democratic credentials of a political party and, in some ways, its maturity as a representative organisation.

Despite its obvious importance, candidate recruitment processes largely remain opaque and secretive. The absence of transparency, consistency, and applied rules affects whether women and other underrepresented groups are successful in these processes, but also whether they even consider putting themselves forward. Wider societal barriers to women in politics (violence, money, and patriarchal society structures) seep directly into and often undermine both formal and informal party candidate selection procedures.

WFD's political party programmes pay close attention to candidate selection processes due to their potential to determine whether women emerge as candidates or not. Candidates may be selected at the national, regional, or local levels. In some cases, the candidates are selected at the local level but must be approved or ratified at the national level. National level ratification has a positive and negative impact on candidate selection: centralised ratification can be used to guarantee viable positions for women candidates, but can also be a means to overturn local nominations of women, often under the guise of meeting a 'threshold' on the number of women candidates required.

Samson Itodo of YIAGA Africa presented research at the conference that attests to the fact that candidate selection is mired in complexity and power struggles. The power to select candidates rests with individuals or institutional organs of parties at different levels and depends on whether the party maintains a centralised or decentralised power configuration in managing intra-party affairs. Despite the existence of formal candidate selection criteria – which can include competency tests, electability surveys, polling data used to assess popularity, and lifetime party membership fees – evidence from the parties indicates candidate selection is usually the private affair of party leaders. The lack of information of the actual procedures or determinants of candidate selection can disproportionately affect women who do not have the access to the elite networks and information as their male counterparts.

Lindiwe Mazibuko of Futurelect presented research conducted in by Women Political Leaders (WPL), a global network of national-level women elected political leaders, in 2022.[1] The survey of 307 women parliamentarians across 66 countries revealed that political parties are seen to play a key role as gatekeepers to positions in politics and internal party issues were viewed as a major hurdle in most respondents' political careers.

Hon. Roseby Gadama, a senior MP from Malawi, detailed the physical assaults, harassment, and threats she suffered during party primaries. She described how her team were attacked and the Presiding Officers from her own political party prevented her supporters from voting. For a number of women politicians at the conference, these threats of violence and attacks do not just come from other political parties, but they are initiated by people within their own party, particularly during candidate selection processes.

Picture below: Women Lead conference participant makes a pledge on how to support women's political leadership. © Westminster Foundation for Democracy
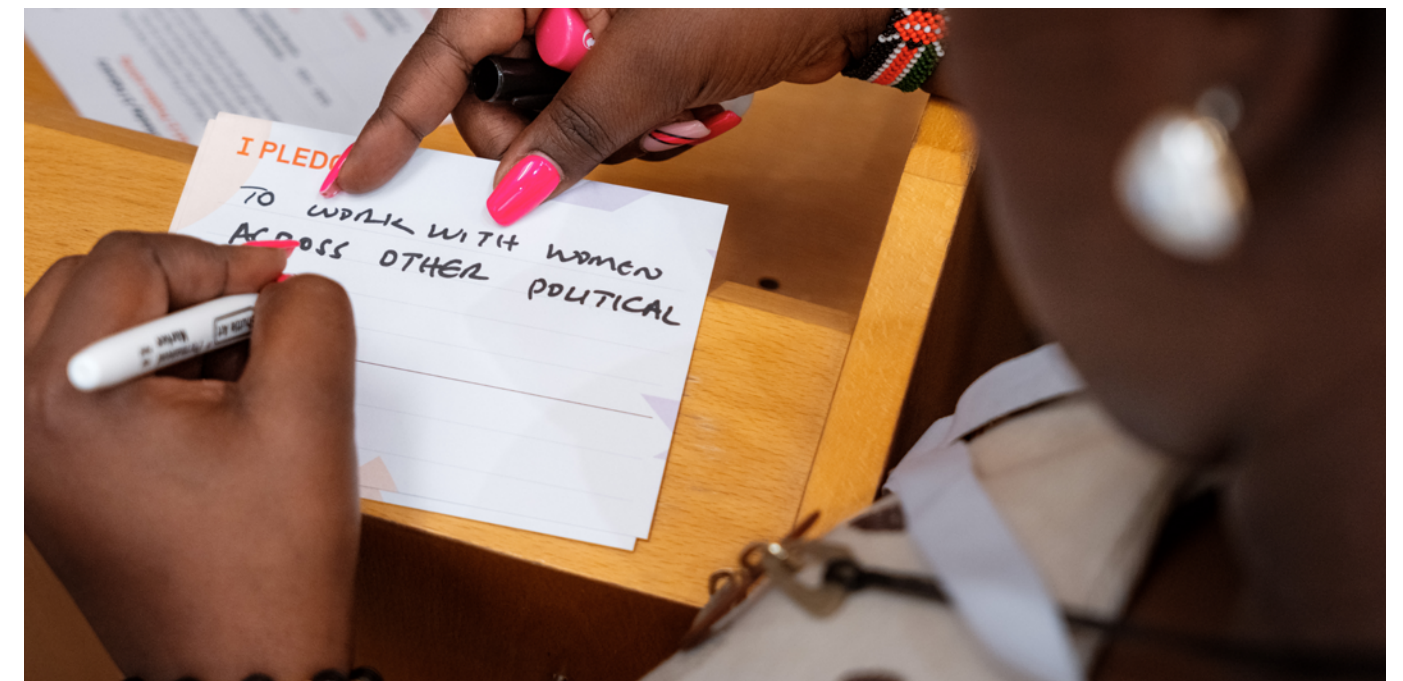
Recommendations for political parties

In understanding what political parties can do to positively affect equality of opportunity for women during candidate selection processes, the conference considered six critical issues. Participants identified what political parties can do, leverage and/or prioritise to help women in politics.

2 | The power of networks

- Create links and partnerships with networks outside the immediate political space, providing access to financial resources.

- Ensure that under-represented groups have equal access to the networks.

- Be open to women engaging across party lines when it comes to issue driving and non-partisan policy issues.

- Ensure that networks are a safe space for women.

- Put in place measures to enable access to networks for women with caring responsibilities.

4 | Positive measures and minimum standards

- Have a strategy and explicit commitment to build upon the legal code and quotas to ensure women are placed in winnable seats or prominent positions of the party lists.

- Empower and elevate women once in a quota seats by putting them in influential positions.

- Promote awareness of positive measures and ensure understanding of why they are important and how they work.

- Advocate and legislate for robust, effective and sustainable positive measures based on international standards that have proven to increase the participation, influence and representation of women.

6 | Women's safety

- All parties must have suitable rules, processes, and structures to identify and respond to acts of violence against members of their party, whether these come from within or outside the party. Staff and finance these policies and measures.

- Publish these policies online or other places where they are visible and where the party can be held accountable to them.

- Put in place a confidential reporting system that ensures women can have the confidence to report violent incidents, knowing they will be taken seriously.

- Have rigorous processes to hold members to account for violent behaviour

- Provide safety and security training for women members,

- Never field a candidate that has a criminal record or pending case of violence against women.

- Put in place effective sanction mechanisms for perpetrators of violence against women in politics.

- Connect with civil society movements, particularly those with a focus women and youth.

1 | Money and material resources

- Eliminate fees for women aspirants.

- Establish a specific fund for women political candidates.

- Commit to actively and publicly campaigning for and with female candidates.

- Leverage business relationships, networks, and donations specifically to raise funds for women candidates.

- Facilitate training support for skills for campaigning and preparing for public office.

- Have clear protocols and guidelines stating how money is allocated.

3 | Identifying a diverse talent pool

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5 | Technology and data

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- Be open to women engaging across party lines when it comes to issue driving and non-partisan policy issues.

- Ensure that networks are a safe space for women.

- Put in place measures to enable access to networks for women with caring responsibilities.

Money, material resources and information: campaign financing and support for women political aspirants

The issue

Entering politics, particularly running an election campaign, is costly in terms of money and time, and men tend to have greater access to resources than women, often through networks. WFD research notes a survey of politicians in over 84 countries that found that women were less likely to receive individual donations than men and as such they were more reliant on party sponsorship and support. WFD research also demonstrates the financial cost of entering politics as a considerable obstacle for many women.[2]

While the costs of campaigning tend to be greater for higher level political jobs, finances can be just as limiting for local politics where there is often just a stipend or very low levels of pay. Women entering any level of politics often have to balance their political activities with caring duties and a second job, unless they can rely on resources from elsewhere (such as from their family, their partner's income or due to being wealthy themselves).

Further to the unequal access to financial resources, women often disadvantaged by the informal criteria that a candidate must meet to be selected. This disadvantage can take multiple forms, including women candidates meeting resistance from local parties who have a preconceived idea of their "ideal candidate" who is male and wealthy; women being asked questions about their marital status and children; and women having less access to relevant information about the selection process, particularly when there are changes to internal party processes.

→ Actions for parties

- Parties should eliminate the fees for women aspirants and establish a specific fund for women political candidates.

- Party leadership should make a firm commitment to actively and publicly campaign for and with their female candidates. When leaders use positive rhetoric calling for gender equality and promote women candidates, it can also have an important effect of motivating further women to stand as candidates

- Party leadership should leverage business relationships, networks, and donations specifically to raise funds for women candidates

- Parties should facilitate expert organisations to provide training support for skills for campaigning and preparing for public office, including financial management

- Parties should make clear protocols and guidelines available that state how money is allocated, particularly in consideration of marginal or safe seats (particularly within the first past the post (FPTP) system).

Picture below: Political leaders representing parties from over twenty countries in Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean came together. Kenyan MP Hon. Millie Odihambo (centre) shared her experiences and expertise.
© Westminster Foundation for Democracy

Theme 2

The power of networks both within and outside of political parties: professional platforms, women's forums, mentoring

The issue

Political parties around the world largely operate on a system of patronage rather than merit, with selection based on who you know, rather than what you know. Parties continue to be male-dominated and, whether by intention or default, often follow an 'old boys' network' model of operating. This can include a spectrum of practices such as organising party business or activities at times or in locations that are not appropriate for women, or more complex factors such as cultivating decision-making processes and an organisational culture that can be off-putting or even hostile to women's contributions.

Networks within parties make a significant difference in helping women access and influence political contexts, including financial resources and the internal workings of political parties. Professional and personal networks help women make it through combative candidate and leadership selection processes. Women's wings and women's networks can be valuable sources of training, support, and mentoring. Women's caucuses and civil society connections provide essential information and help amplify efforts to influence policy priorities and party manifestos.

Outside of parties, business networks and rich individual offer opportunities for accessing financial and professional services that are key for successful political leadership. Creating space and introducing women to business networks enables them with access financial resources necessary to run for office and leadership positions.

→ Actions for parties

- Parties should create links and partnerships with networks outside the immediate political space, such as universities, religious institutions, and businesses, for their women members to engage with.

- Recognising intersectionality, parties should ensure that under-represented groups have equal access to the networks.

- Parties should be open to women engaging across party lines when it comes to issue driving and non-partisan policy issues. This is crucial for women being successful in achieving change and raising their public profile.

- Parties should ensure that networks are a safe space for women and that measures are taken to enable access for women with caring responsibilities, such as providing support for childcare.

What works best is often contextual. Some parties create formal internal bodies with mandates to support women, which can make a very real difference in the recruitment and advancement of women within the organisation. Conversely, these wings or caucuses can also be politically toothless, used in practice as a means to isolate women from where and how decisions are actually made (the attitude being, 'the women have the women's wings, the men have the Party'), or may not receive the funding that would make them effective. Additionally, some women find that informal arrangements – such as a standing monthly meal or coffee with women members, social media or chat groups, or a shared resource pool for party-related expenses – can be more effective and a better use of their time.

Picture below: Sabina Ćudić, an MP from Bosnia and Herzegovina shares her perspective at the conference in London. © Westminster Foundation for Democracy

Theme 3
Identifying and engaging a diverse pool of talent

The issue

When it comes to standing for public office, research confirms that asking women to stand, and doing so repeatedly, is often needed before women put themselves forward. The problem is not that women lack the motivation and commitment to public service and wanting to help their communities, rather the problem is that women to do think they no fit the pre-conceived image of the "ideal candidate". They do not feel welcome in the formal political arena, including political parties. The current lack of diversity within formal political spaces reinforces the feeling that women do not belong in this space.

Political parties cannot hide behind the claim that women's under-representation is a supply issue and that women to not put themselves forward for selection. Socialisation and exposure to politics, in addition to encouragement, play a key role in shaping political interest in women candidates. Research shows that encouragement by their political parties is cited by women around the world as a key factor which influenced their decision to take the next step to become a candidate.

Parties having institutional systems in place to proactively recruit women from a range of different backgrounds and an internal culture that encourages women to stand for public office is essential for greater women's representation. Women struggle to make campaigning, networking, and the workplace environment fit with their childcare and caring responsibilities. Women from ethnic minorities and disabled women face additional barriers and discrimination.

→ Actions for parties

- **Parties should have a clear written commitment and strategy on the recruitment of a diverse range of women candidates. Elements of this could include:**

  - An internal mechanism for monitoring the participation of women in their candidate selection processes and internal party elections. This information can be used by parties to identify gaps in their outreach and analyse their party's strengths and shortcoming in attracting women candidates.

  - Incentives for all members of the party to recruit women from a range of different backgrounds, with recognition and reward given to members that identify and engage new talented women. Identifying women that are actively involved in local campaigns can be a good entry point.

- **Political leaders should use their platforms at every opportunity to verbally acknowledge the important of equality, diversity, and more women representatives. Frequent oral and written statements during party speeches, plans, and reports can contribute to the socialisation and normalisation of women candidates.**

- **Parties should promote campaigns such as #AskHerToStand, recognising they can be key for identifying and encouraging women to stand for elected office.**

- **Parties should invest resources into leadership programmes and training academies for women candidates within their party. In addition to better equipping the women for running for office, these programmes provide opportunities for members to come into contact with other women and are often a key source of encouragement for many aspirants that decide to stand.**

- **Parties should create internal mechanisms to facilitate political mentors, particularly between experienced women MPs and aspirants.**

- **Parties should ensure that female candidates are able to combine childcare and political activism. Actions can include:**

  - Scheduling meetings and events at times and locations that work for a wide range of people, taking into account candidates with caring responsibilities.

  - Providing facilities or funding for childcare for candidates that need to be campaigning and networking.

  - Create a culture that welcomes the presence of children at meetings or events.

The use of positive measures and minimum standards for women's participation: quotas, all-women short lists, designates seats

The issue

The persistence of women's underrepresentation in political parties and legislatures has led many countries to introduce quotas and other positive measures as the best way to overcome the barriers to women's recruitment, for example through voluntary party quotas, parity laws, candidate quota laws, or reserved seats. These mechanisms for increasing women's representation have, on the whole, resulted in major advances in women's representation globally in recent decades.

However, these advancements are not without challenges. Women elected and selected through these mechanisms frequently complain of the 'stigma of quota' – being perceived by colleagues in elected bodies as less qualified and less deserving of their seat. This often affects whether they are considered for (or how hard they have to fight for) more senior positions.

Additionally, in some parties, the use of positive measures in a specific number of seats or positions has led to the practice of all other seats or positions being perceived as reserved for men rather than open to competition. If, for example, minimum standards require that 30% of seats in an elected body must be held by women, the practice among political parties is to assume that the remaining 70% should be held by men, contributing to another de facto glass ceiling.

→ Actions for parties

- Parties should have a strategy and explicit commitment to build upon the legal code and quotas to ensure women are placed in winnable seats or prominent positions of the party lists. Legal codes alone are not enough.

- Parties should find ways to empower and elevate women once in a quota seats, through putting them in influence positions within the party bloc or legislature. Women need to be able to demonstrate their skills and parties should help women raise their profile. This will enable them to stand in an elected seat in the next election and allow for new women to come into the quota seat – thus increasing the overall number of women represented within the political system.

- Parties need to promote awareness of the positive measure within the party membership to ensure collective understanding of why positive measures are important and how they function. Internal party education will help to avoiding misconceptions and the notion of "second-class" elected officials. This is important for overcoming the narrative that these seats are "special" or "not properly elected", but rather they are necessary measures to rebalance disproportionate underrepresentation.

- Parties should be advocating and legislating for robust, effective and sustainable positive measures based on international standards that have proven to increase the participation, influence and representation of women.
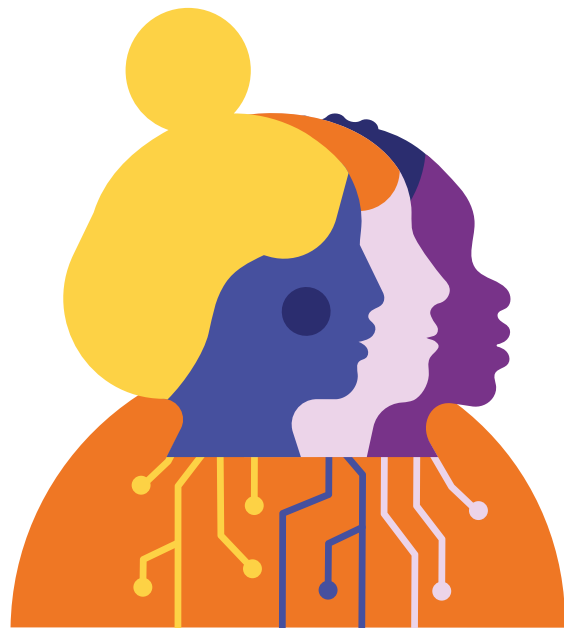
Picture below: Conference delegates heard perspectives from more than 20 countries, discussing shared challenges.
© Westminster Foundation for Democracy

Opportunities and risks to women's participation in the use of technology and data in candidate selection and party primaries

The issue

Women are less likely to access or use digital technologies. For instance, women are still 8% less likely than men to own a mobile phone, and 20% less likely to use the internet on a mobile.[3] This gender digital divide (or technology gap) hinders women's political aspirations since communication technology is essential in public life.

Technology is also being used as a political weapon. Women often experience a disproportionate amount of digital harassment and abuse compared to men. A report by the Economist Intelligence Unit found that 85% of women globally have witnessed or experienced online violence.[4] Digital violence against women is also more likely to be personalised and sexualised.

While democracies around the world try to combat disinformation, women in politics are also fighting against gendered disinformation – a digital tactic used to dehumanise women and deter them from participating in the public sphere.[5] Thus, technology remains gender unequal and requires intentional thought on how it can be used to support, empower, and protect women in politics.

→ Actions for parties

- Parties' own Codes of Conduct should cover online behaviour and take action when there is intra-party misconduct. Party leadership should lead by example and call out gender-based abuse and harassment. Party members that produce or promote any gendered disinformation should be punished by the party's internal mechanisms.

- Parties should establish systems to prevent, respond rapidly, and remove online harassment and abuse to their women candidates. Parties have the responsibility to proactively protect their women candidates and must invest resources into frequently engaging with platforms and fact-checking networks to protect women in politics.

- Parties should advocate for relevant legislation to address women's online safety and criminalise online violence against women and gendered disinformation.

- Parties should provide a robust support system for women related to how they are able to manage and respond to online abuse. There must be adequate attention paid to resilience building and wellbeing support, so women do not feel they need to leave politics.

Picture below: Groups focused on specific themes and recommended concrete actions, which they presented to the conference.
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Theme 6
Women's safety during selection processes

The issue

Violence against women in politics is a barrier to women's political participation. Political parties have a central role in considering how political spaces can be made safer for women and creating a violence-free political environment.

Currently, there is a lack of specific data collected on violence against women in politics at all levels, particularly within political parties. There is some evidence that women do not report incidents with political parties, as reporting within protected party structures and against a party member carries additional disincentives; for example, women fear that confronting male party colleagues could jeopardise their status or position. There is research indicating the occurrence of violence increases as women rise to higher positions within their party.

Due to the competitive environment that political parties operate within, sharing information publicly about violence experienced by members is likely to be detrimental to the reputation and public image of a political party. There is a strong disincentive to making it public, unless the information is accompanied by measures taken to tackle the issue.

Further to this, the low number of women in leadership positions within political parties is a vicious circle. With so few women in leadership positions makes it more difficult to raise the topic in debate, whilst at the same time, the fear of violence against politically active women deters women for participating in formal political spaces.

→ Actions for parties

- Parties must have in place suitable rules, processes, and structures to identify and respond to acts of violence against members of their party. These policies and measures should be adequately staffed and financed.

- Parties can publish these policies on their website to encourage transparency and openness. This will also help to raise awareness and encourage other political parties to take similar steps.

- There must be a confidential reporting system within the political party that ensures women can have the confidence to report violent incidents, knowing they will be taken seriously. An independent committee or party governing body could handle reporting and complaints. This will build the confidence of women members to report to the party.

- There must be rigorous processes to hold members to account for violent behaviour which meet standards of fairness while protecting those reporting the behaviour.

- Parties should provide safety and security training for women members, with extra attention for those standing in selection processes and elections.

- Parties must not field a candidate that has a criminal record or pending case of violence against women.

- There must be effective sanction mechanisms for perpetrators of violence against women in politics. Depending on the law of the country, party rules, and the nature of offence, these could include financial penalties; suspension from the party for a period of time or expulsion; and a ban from representing the party or standing for elected office. The party complaint and sanction mechanism is separate from any legal remedies that a person can pursue within their national legal framework.

- Parties must connect with civil society movements, particularly those with a focus women and youth. These links allow joint activities on awareness-raising, training, and events. Joint work with other political parties, such as campaigning for greater gender equality provisions within parliaments or a cross-party code of conduct, should be considered.

Endnotes

1   WLP (2022) Women's Political Careers 2022. https://www.womenpoliticalleaders.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Womens-Political-Careers-Report.pdf

2   Cowper-Cowles, M (2021). Women Political Leaders: The Impact of Gender on Democracy. WFD and Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/women-political-leaders-impact-gender-democracy

3   Rowntree, Oliver (2020). The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020. GSMA. https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf

4   Ahlenback, Veronica, et al. (2022). Technology Facilitated Gender Based Violence: Preliminary Landscape Analysis. The Global Partnership. Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: Preliminary Landscape Analysis (publishing.service.gov.uk)

5   Id. at 23.

Further Reading

OSCE/ODIHR (2022) Addressing Violence Against Women in Politics in the OSCE Region: Toolkit Tool 3: Addressing Violence Against Women in Political Parties

The Fawcett Society (2018) Strategies for success. Women's experiences of selection and election in UK parliament.

Women's political careers: Leadership in practice

Women Political Leaders: The Impact of Gender on Democracy

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is the UK public body dedicated to supporting democracy around the world. Operating internationally, WFD works with parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups as well as on elections to help make political systems fairer, more inclusive and accountable.

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