

Where are all the Women?

Why women continue to be underrepresented in public office globally and what we can do to change that.

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For Nobel Laureate and women's rights advocate Leymah Gbowee, it's no secret that the key to a brighter future for the world lies within young women who have yet to be empowered. Gbowee, who originates from Liberia, has made it her life's work to help girls discover their potential and set high goals for themselves. She created the Young Girl's Transformative Project which seeks to "[create] a space for young girls to gather and unlock intelligence, passion, commitment, focus, and great leadership [that is within each girl]1." Through this and other initiatives, Gbowee hopes to transform the global landscape by equipping women with the confidence and proficiency to take on larger goals - whether that's graduating high school or running for public office.

While Gbowee concentrates her efforts in Africa, her messages are applicable to the world at large. Overwhelmingly, women are underrepresented at the highest levels of leadership. In the United States, 15% of C-level positions within companies are held by women2 while only 18.8% of the 113th Congress is comprised of women3. Globally, 13% of parliamentary seats are held by women. Perhaps the most staggeringly low representation can be found at the top: of 190 heads of state, just 9 are female2. This extreme underrepresentation has had a direct negative impact on women in many different aspects of life as important women's rights issues are either misunderstood by male representatives or worse, completely swept under the rug.

This begs the question why, in 2014, are women continuously not present at the highest levels of leadership? Jennifer Lawless, Associate Professor of Government at American University, suggests women are not underrepresented in public office because they are less capable of winning elections. Rather, women are underrepresented because they do not run for office at nearly the same rate as men. She states that there is, "a substantial gender difference where men are far more likely to consider running for office, they're far more likely to think they're qualified for running for office,

and they're far more likely to think they'd win if they ran for office4." Lawless discovered that women are actually 50% less likely than men to seriously consider running for office5.

Correcting this problem presents a huge obstacle for women. And I say 'obstacle for women' because it's time for us to take a stand for ourselves. However, this hurdle can be surmounted in three key ways:

Girls must be socialized at a young age to believe that, with hard work and dedication, they are just as qualified and can achieve as much as their male counterparts can.

Female role models like Gbowee need to be featured more in the media by female reporters.

Women have to utilize the greatest network they have, other women, by supporting and empowering one another.

Altering Traditional Socialization

The first step in narrowing the gender gap at the top is eliminating the gender gap at the bottom. Lawless, along with Richard Fox, Professor of Political Science at Loyola Marymount University, found that "young men are more likely than young women to be socialized by their parents to think about politics as a possible career path6." Parental support is cited as a large motivator for young people considering running for office. Lawless and Fox reported that "Fifty percent of college students whose mothers regularly suggested that they run for office reported that they would definitely like to run in the future. Only 3 percent who received no such encouragement from their mothers expressed interest in a future candidacy6."

Furthermore, based on school and peer interactions, "young women tend to be exposed to less political information and discussion than do young men... [And] young men are more likely than young women to have played organized sports and care about winning6." Lawless and Fox have pointed out that several key characteristics required for political office (i.e. having support, keeping up to date with current issues,



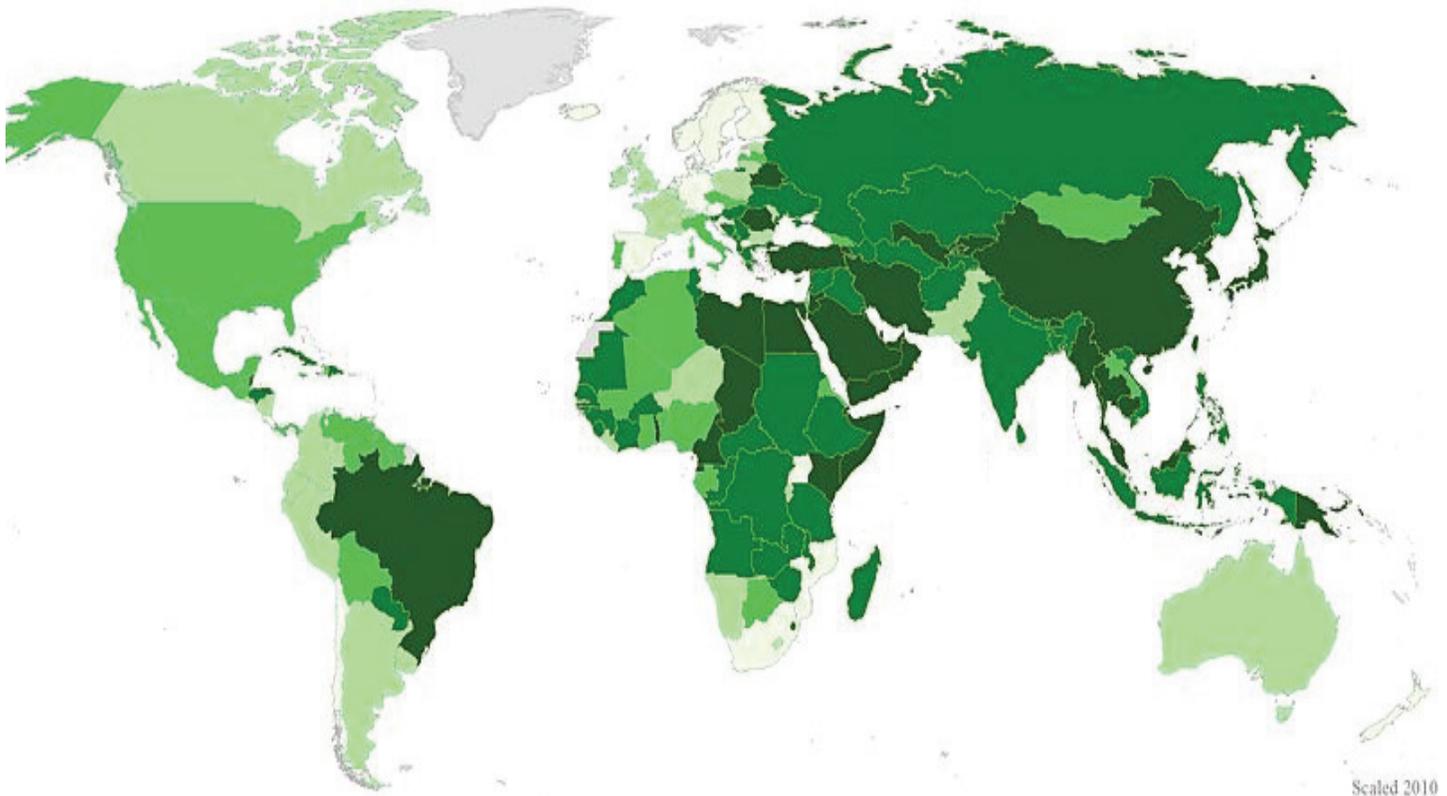
and fostering a desire to win) are more prominent in boys and underdeveloped in girls at a young age.

In a recent C-SPAN interview, Lawless explained, “men have generally been told that they’re good at what they do, especially when they’re operating in male dominated environments. And women tend too not be discouraged from operating that way, but they’re encouraged to acquire different types of qualities and traits, and so they’re a little bit more self-deprecating, they doubt their confidence⁴.” After this type of socialization at a young age, women are left feeling as though they are under-qualified compared to their male counterparts.

Rejecting traditional socialization patterns will help even the playing field for men and women at a much earlier age, paving the way for women to build goals as high as men. Including girls on discussions at home regarding current events and encouraging them to run for leadership positions at school and in extracur-

(Left) Leymah Gbowee leads a conference of women at a Young Girls Transformative Project, stressing the importance of education and mutual empowerment. (Below) A graphic representation of female participation in government across the globe, courtesy of womenstates.org.

Governmental Participation by Women



- No Data
- 40-50%+ of parliament; rank adjusted by percent female ministers
- 30-39% of parliament; rank adjusted by percent female ministers
- 20-29% of parliament; rank adjusted by percent female ministers
- 10-19% of parliament; rank adjusted by percent female ministers
- 0-10% of parliament; rank adjusted by percent female ministers

on discussions at home regarding current events and encouraging them to run for leadership positions at school and in extracurriculars will boost their confidence and prepare them for greater success later in life.

Featuring Positive Role Models

The second step to getting more women into top leadership positions is showing women everywhere what they can achieve. For men, it's easy to find a role model to look up to. Anyone can open a history book and read about great male accomplishments or turn on the news to listen to stories about male power struggles. For women, this isn't the case.

In media today, women star in reality series including *The Real Housewives* and *The Bachelor/The Bachelorette*. In dramas on ABC, smart women occasionally rise to the top (second to the male President or male Chief of Surgery) but become distracted with love affairs and questions of how they will raise their children if they can ever sort out the love triangle they've been involved in for the past five episodes. What isn't highlighted? The journey they took to rise to the President's Cabinet or to put themselves through medical school. Those are the accomplishments girls need to be exposed to in order to see what they can attain.

What's worse is the way some (not all) news anchors portray women. Instead of featuring Gbowee or countless other women who engage in humanitarian, political, and scientific efforts around the globe, news anchors of both genders instead talk about what's happening at the Kardashian compound, laugh at what Miley Cyrus wore during her latest provocative performance, or spend the broadcast calling Hillary Clinton and other female political leaders "bossy." For girls watching at home, this sends the message that they will get recognized for what they wear and how they act instead of how hard they work and what they can accomplish.

The media should be lauding the accomplishments of women who let their actions speak for themselves. GM recently hired its first female CEO⁷. Malala Yousafzai has been making waves around the world by telling her story and pushing education to eradicate terrorism⁸. Marthe Gautier, an 88-year-old French pediatric cardiologist, recently received a medal from the French Federation of Human Genetics for her role in Down Syndrome research⁹. All of these noteworthy women are worth discussing and would certainly give young girls new goals to aspire to.

Empowering Women Everywhere

The final, and perhaps most important, step is for women to build up each other. If women work together,

there's no limit to what we can achieve. For women, driving the change we want to see relies on us working together and pooling our strengths. Gbowee illustrated this concept in her TED Talk with the story of 50 girls from a small village in Liberia who worked together to drive change in their village¹. Together, they created a campaign to get local women involved in governing decisions with the tagline "Even pretty girls vote." At the voting circle, a process traditionally carried out only by male village elders, the girls partook in decision making and worked together to overthrow one candidate who wanted to repeal an anti-rape law. When the girls sell items at the local marketplace, they give any money they can back to young mothers so they too can have the opportunity to graduate from high school.

Before each powerful woman reached her goals, she was a young girl with big dreams. At the end of her TED Talk, Gbowee concludes by telling the audience, "'Will you journey with me to help that girl, be it an African girl, an American girl, or a Japanese girl, fulfill her wish, fulfill her dream, achieve the dream? Because all of these great inventors and innovators... are also sitting in tiny corners in different parts of the world. And all they are asking us to do is create that space to unlock their intelligence, unlock their passion, unlock all of the great things that they hold within themselves. Let's journey together.'"

1 Gbowee, Leymah. "Unlock the Intelligence, Passion, Greatness of Girls | Transcript | TED." Ted.com. TED, Mar. 2012. Web. 10 Mar. 2014.

2 Sandberg, Sheryl. *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2013. Print.

3 United States. Cong. Congressional Research Service. *Membership of the 113th Congress: A Profile*. By Jennifer E. Manning. 113th Cong. Cong. Rept. R42964. Washington D.C.: n.p., 2014. Print.

4 "Book Discussion on *Becoming a Candidate*." BOOKTV. C-SPAN. Washington D.C., 8 Feb. 2013. Television.

5 Lawless, Jennifer L., and Richard Logan. *It Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. Print.

6 Lawless, Jennifer L., and Richard L. Fox. *Girls Just Wanna Not Run*. American University School of Public Affairs, Washington D.C., Mar. 2013. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.

7 VanHulle, Lindsay. "Women Rising through Ranks of GM." *USA Today*. Gannett, 10 Mar. 2014. Web. 11 Mar. 2014.

8 Clark, Liat. "Malala: Push Education to Deter Terrorism." *Wired.com*. Wired UK, 4 Mar. 2014. Web. 11 Mar. 2014.

9 Pain, Elisabeth. "After More Than 50 Years, a Dispute Over Down Syndrome Discovery." *Sciencemag.org*. AAAS, 11 Feb. 2014. Web. 11 Mar. 2014.