



# The 2024 Super Election Year for Women in Politics: Stagnation, Setbacks, and Surprising Wins

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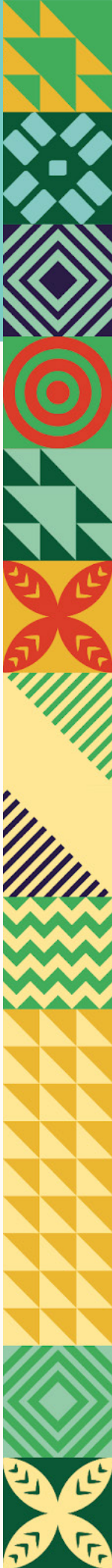


*Colmena fund*  
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# Introduction

*At the beginning of 2024, many observers wondered whether the “super election year” would push the world further down the path of authoritarianism.*

In several countries, including in Venezuela, El Salvador, Thailand, and Tunisia, electoral contests were indeed manipulated by incumbents to further entrench their power. But the global picture was not uniformly negative. Whether in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Senegal, or Guatemala, citizens mobilized from below to push back against executive overreach and bad governance. Although far-right leaders and parties made gains in several Western democracies, including in Austria, France, Germany, Portugal, and the United States, this same pattern was not evident in many other parts of the world, where politics were shaped by other issues and cleavages.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these varied political outcomes, the past year’s record number of elections brought no uptick in women’s political representation. Globally, women’s parliamentary representation and the number of countries led by women failed to increase. The barriers to reaching gender parity in politics are mounting, from continuing democratic erosion and rising ethno-nationalism to a widening pushback

against progressive gender norms in different parts of the world. Yet looking beyond global and regional averages also reveals surprising bright spots. In countries as diverse as Mongolia, Sri Lanka, and the United Kingdom, more women are serving in political office than ever before. Several countries elected their first-ever female presidents, including Mexico and Namibia.

This report analyzes advances and setbacks in women’s political representation in 2024, building on the [mid-year assessment](#) published by the Colmena Fund for Women’s Political Power in October. It begins by examining global trend lines in women’s parliamentary and executive representation, highlighting both progress and backsliding. It then turns to four countries that held significant elections over the past year and interrogates their impact on women’s political power: the Dominican Republic, India, South Africa, and Sri Lanka. To close, the analysis draws attention to several broader themes that emerged from the electoral contests of the past year.

# 1. A global pattern of stagnation

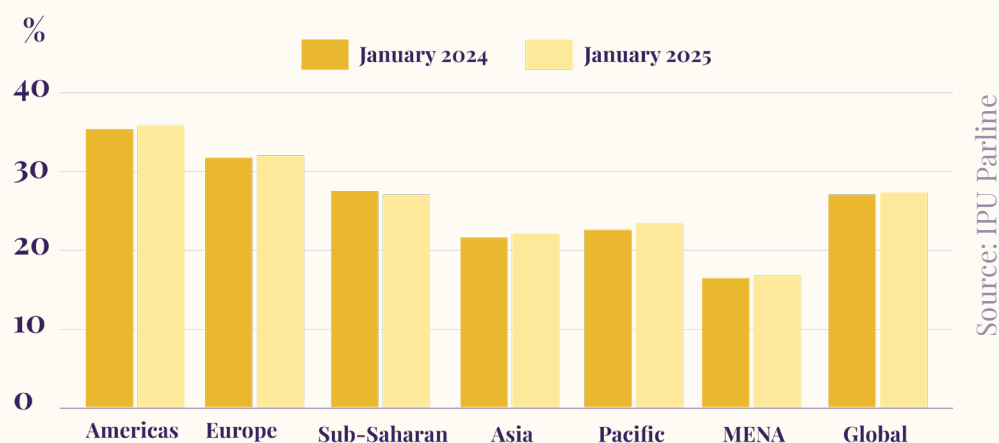
Sixty-six countries plus the European Union held elections in 2024. This report focuses on a subset of 46 parliamentary contests and 31 presidential contests that took place in countries categorized by the Varieties of Democracy project as liberal democracies, electoral democracies, or electoral autocracies, while excluding elections that took place in the closed autocracies of Chad, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Syria, and Uzbekistan.<sup>1</sup>

*Between January 1, 2024, and January 1, 2025, women's global parliamentary representation largely stagnated. At the beginning of 2024, women made up 26.9 percent of parliamentarians globally, a share that rose only minimally to 27.2 percent by the start of 2025.<sup>2</sup>*

Regionally, Asia and the Pacific region saw the largest increase in women's parliamentary representation, from 21.4 to 22.1 percent and from 22.5 to 23.2 percent, respectively. In Sub-Saharan Africa, meanwhile, women's representation decreased from 27.3 percent to 27 percent (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

Globally, the number of countries led by women decreased over the past year. As of January 1, 2025, there were only 24 countries led by a woman head of state and/or government, compared to 27 countries in January 2024.<sup>4</sup> With the inauguration of Namibia's new female president, Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, in March 2025, this number has risen to 25.

*Figure 1: Women's representation in parliament (all chambers, January 1, 2024, vs. January 1, 2025)*





## Parliamentary elections: A negative trendline alongside important bright spots

A closer analysis of parliamentary elections held over the course of 2024 reveals a pattern of backsliding.

*Of the 46 elections for lower or single houses of parliament that took place in 2024, twenty-eight—or 60.8 percent—brought a decrease in women’s political representation relative to December 2023.<sup>5</sup>*

In contrast, only seventeen countries—or 37 percent—saw an increase in women’s representation. In Ghana, women’s parliamentary representation remained stuck at 14.5 percent.

However, the number of countries that made significant gains in women’s parliamentary representation, defined here as four percentage points or more, exceeded the number of countries that registered significant declines. Women’s share of seats in the lower or single house of parliament declined significantly in Austria, Bhutan, Belarus, Mozambique, Senegal and Tuvalu. At the same time, nine countries made gains of four percentage points or more, namely the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Georgia, Japan, Kiribati, Mongolia, Palau, Sri Lanka, and the United Kingdom. Some of these gains were rooted in the

implementation of a new gender quota (Mongolia) or the strengthening of existing quota provisions (Dominican Republic). In other countries, women’s representation increased due to the improved electoral performance of political parties with stronger commitments to women’s leadership, as was the case with the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, the National People’s Power party in Sri Lanka, and the Labour Party in the United Kingdom.

Fifteen countries also held elections for their upper house of parliament. Nine of those countries saw an uptick in women’s upper house representation, whereas only two countries—Mexico and Pakistan—registered a minor decrease relative to December 2023. Women’s representation stagnated in the upper houses of the Dominican Republic, South Africa, and the United States, whereas Tunisia held its first election since the government re-established the country’s upper house in 2022. However, several of the most significant representational gains occurred in non-democratic contexts in which elections were widely deemed not free and fair, including in Belarus, Cambodia and Thailand. In these countries, women’s increased representation is unlikely to translate into far-reaching legislative influence, as power is already highly concentrated in the executive branch and women’s advancement is largely dependent on their loyalty to the ruling party.





## Presidential elections: Five women win presidential contests

*Of the 31 presidential contests that took place in liberal democracies, electoral democracies, and electoral autocracies in 2024, fourteen—or almost half—included female candidates on the election ballot.<sup>6</sup> However, only five elections produced female winners: Iceland, Mexico, Moldova, North Macedonia, and Namibia. In North Macedonia, Mexico, and Namibia, women are leading the government for the first time in history.*

In Iceland, Halla Tomasdottir, a businesswoman and investor, emerged victorious from a crowded field of candidates. The fact that the top three finishers in the race were all women is a testament to the country's strong track record of women's leadership.<sup>7</sup> In Moldova, on the other hand, the incumbent president and pro-European politician Maia Sandu was re-elected for a second term in a two-round election marked by significant Russian interference and gendered disinformation targeting Sandu and other women leaders.<sup>8</sup> Newly-elected North Macedonian President Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, a 70-year-old law

professor backed by the country's nationalist conservatives, also won a run-off vote. Although her role is largely ceremonial, her victory reflects rising nationalist sentiments among citizens frustrated with the slow pace of EU integration. Yet she has also spoken out for women's rights in the country, describing herself as an “emancipated woman with traditional family values.”<sup>9</sup>

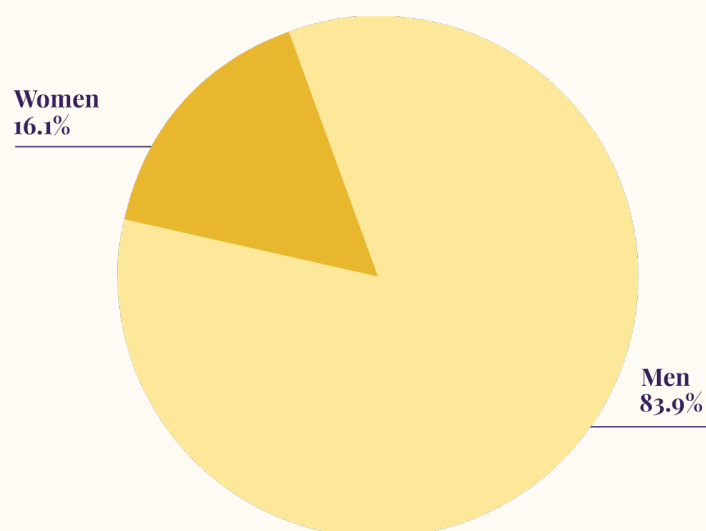
Beyond Europe, Claudia Sheinbaum was sworn in as Mexico's first female president in October 2024, propelled to victory by the country's strong track record of women's representation as well as the enduring popularity of her predecessor, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. In Namibia, meanwhile, Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) became the first woman to ascend to the presidency in March 2025. Nandi-Ndaitwah first joined SWAPO in the 1960s when the organization was fighting for the country's independence, and has previously served as vice president, deputy prime minister, and minister of international relations. Although SWAPO has lost popularity amidst citizen frustration with inequality and unemployment, she managed to unite different party factions and benefited from a clean political image untainted by corruption allegations.<sup>10</sup> However, Nandi-Ndaitwah is unlikely to represent a radical break from the past: she is not only a long-standing party leader but also a relatively conservative voice on gender issues.<sup>11</sup>



*In sum, the 2024 election year brought no groundbreaking shifts in women's global political representation. Instead, a broader negative trendline underscores that the road to gender parity remains arduous and uncertain.*

Women's parliamentary representation is still contingent on effective quota or parity provisions or the election of political parties with firm commitments to women's inclusion. Executive leadership is even more difficult for women to break into. The following sections examine four significant elections of the past year in greater detail and explore the broader challenges and opportunities shaping women's political leadership in these countries as well as globally.

*Figure 2: Heads of state/government elected in 2024*





# Country snapshots

## Dominican Republic: Improvements in quota implementation

In the Dominican Republic, incumbent president Luis Abinader won re-election by a wide margin, having cultivated widespread support through his tough stance on corruption and Haitian migration as well as the country's strong economic track record.<sup>12</sup> His Partido Revolucionario Moderno (PRM) and its allies also secured a narrow parliamentary majority.<sup>13</sup> The May 2024 elections brought a significant uptick in the number of women elected, due in large part to a stricter enforcement of existing quota rules. Women made up 43.7 percent of candidates and 70 women entered the new parliament, up from 53 in 2020. Women's parliamentary representation now stands at 36.8 percent.<sup>14</sup>

The years leading up to the election had been marked by significant confusion about the country's quota reform. A new law implemented ahead of the 2020 polls required parties to nominate a minimum of 40 percent and a maximum of 60 percent of candidates of the same sex on their candidate lists for the Chamber of Deputies. In other words, lists that contained less than 40 percent women and more than 60 percent men would no longer be accepted (the Senate, on the other hand, has no equivalent requirement). Yet the law did not specify whether this rule applied nationally or in each electoral district. The question was significant: if the

quota applied only nationally, parties could simply relegate women to districts they were unlikely to win.<sup>15</sup> Various lawsuits ensued, yet a new electoral law adopted in 2023 failed to clarify the dispute. It was only after a group of women politicians alongside civil society organizations launched a legal petition that the Constitutional Court, the Central Electoral Board, and the Superior Electoral Tribunal clarified that the quota did in fact apply in each district. Ahead of the 2024 polls, an automated candidate registration system further ensured that non-compliant party lists could not be registered. Together, these measures secured the selection of more women candidates, including in winnable districts.<sup>16</sup>

At the subnational level, the results were more mixed. Municipal elections held in February 2024 saw an eleven percent increase in the share of council member positions held by women, which rose up to 41 percent.<sup>17</sup> Yet the total number of women mayors declined by 2 percent—even though more women ran for the mayoral post than in the past. Women now make up only 10 percent of all mayors but hold 90 percent of deputy mayor positions. This imbalance indicates that parties remain more comfortable relegating women to secondary positions unless they are legally required to do otherwise.<sup>18</sup>





*Political violence targeting women was a major issue on the campaign trail. A 2020 study by the United Nations Development Programme found that 93 percent of female candidates surveyed had suffered from some form of political violence, whether in the form of insults, intimidation, defamation, online harassment, or pressure to resign.<sup>19</sup>*

Although new regulations classify gender-based political violence as an electoral crime that is punishable with a prison sentence, the mechanisms for accessing justice are still not well-understood by candidates. Violence against women in public life occurs in a context of widespread impunity for gender-based violence. The Dominican Republic has the second-highest femicide rate in Latin America after Honduras, yet the issue has received only limited government attention.<sup>20</sup>

Another key challenge that will likely shape Dominican politics going forward is the issue of abortion. The country is one of six Latin American nations that criminalizes abortion without any exceptions, and women face up to two years in prison for ending a pregnancy. The maternal mortality rate is almost twice the regional average.<sup>21</sup> Over the past few years, women's rights activists have mobilized under the banner of "Las Tres Causales" to permit abortion under three circumstances: when a woman's life is at risk, when the pregnancy is not viable, or in cases of rape or incest.<sup>22</sup> Abinader had made the approval of these exceptions a key plank of his 2020 election campaign, only to sidestep the issue during his first term in office. Shortly after his

re-election in May, the Dominican Congress debated an even more restrictive version of the penal code that would not only retain the total abortion ban but also reduce punishments for sexual violence within marriage and weaken legal protections for LGBTQ people. Sustained protests led the parliament to suspend the vote, but the issue is likely to make a comeback.<sup>23</sup> For Dominican women's rights activists, the proposed amendments reflect the increasing mobilization of conservative and religious politicians and civil society groups that are seeking to reverse advances in women's and LGBTQ rights and tighten existing restrictions.<sup>24</sup>



## India: A weakened Modi government, but few gains for women leaders

Last year's biggest election took place in India from April to June 2024. The opposition alliance led by the Congress Party made unexpected electoral gains, forcing Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to build a coalition with allied parties in order to form a government. Modi had campaigned specifically to win over women voters, including by holding women-only rallies and promoting himself as a leader who has delivered for women's safety and welfare. Yet these messages failed to resonate with many women. In fact, a post-election survey by Lokniti, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, found that men voted for the BJP at slightly higher rates (37 vs. 36 percent).<sup>25</sup>

Women's turnout was high: in fact, female voters surpassed men in 19 out of 36 states and Union territories.<sup>26</sup>

*India's rapidly closing gender gap in voting—rooted in targeted political education, awareness-raising, and electoral management reforms—stands out as a remarkable success story for advocates and reformers, particularly as female labor force participation remains low and women lag men across other forms of political engagement. Parties now view women as an important constituency and target their campaigns accordingly.*

In the case of the BJP, however, these efforts have played into traditional gender norms, by promising to make women's lives as caregivers easier rather than challenging existing gender hierarchies and inequalities.<sup>27</sup>

With respect to women's political representation, the election was a relative setback. In September 2023, the BJP passed the long-stalled Women's Reservation Bill that sets aside a third of parliamentary seats for women. However, the bill will not be in force until at least 2029. Without a quota in place, women's political representation in the lower house declined for the first time since 2004, from a previous high point of over 15 percent (reached in mid-2023) to 13.7 percent. The number of women parliamentarians decreased from 78 elected in 2019 to 74 elected in 2024, even though slightly more women competed than in the last election.<sup>28</sup> The overall share of women candidates remained low, with women running up against a lack of financial resources, patriarchal norms within households and families, political violence, as well as weak party support.

Although the BJP continued to field the largest numbers of women candidates and winners, the party's declining vote share meant that the number of female BJP parliamentarians dropped from 41 to 31. The Congress Party, on the other hand, increased its female representation from 6 to 13, though the party nominated fewer women candidates than in 2019.<sup>29</sup> In general, women performed better in India's southern states as well as in smaller parties, such as the All India Trinamool Congress and the Odisha-based Biju Janata Dal Party (both parties have party-



internal candidate quotas).<sup>30</sup> At the state level, where women's representation stood at 9 percent prior to the election, the results were mixed: some states experienced a decline in women winners; others saw an incremental increase.<sup>31</sup>

Muslim women remain particularly underrepresented. Since coming to power, Modi has built his reputation as a leader who prioritizes the rights and interests of India's Hindu majority over those of the country's large Muslim minority. Prior to 2014, the outgoing parliament counted 30 Muslim lawmakers. Today, Muslims hold only 25 out of 543 seats (4.6 percent)—even though they represent 14 percent of the Indian population.<sup>32</sup> Women make up a tiny fraction of this group: in 2019, the number of Muslim women MPs decreased from four out of 543 (0.7 percent) to one, namely Sajda Ahmed of West Bengal.<sup>33</sup> Ahmed won her re-election campaign in 2024, representing the All India Trinamool Congress in Uluberia constituency. She is joined by Iqra Hasan, who was elected as a member of the Samajwadi Party in Western Uttar Pradesh.<sup>34</sup> Hasan, who comes from a political family and is now one of the youngest sitting MPs, managed to defeat the sitting BJP representative by cultivating grassroots support and focusing extensively on women's empowerment.<sup>35</sup>

Looking ahead, one key question is whether Modi's weakened position will curb his Hindu nationalist agenda and anti-democratic tendencies. Despite limited electoral gains, Indian women continue to mobilize for change beyond formal politics. In August 2024, medical workers began a national strike to protest the rape and killing of a trainee doctor at a public hospital in West Bengal, with women doctors in particular demanding safer working conditions. The strike followed a series of mass mobilizations against sexual violence in recent years. Despite Modi's assurances that Indian women are

safer under his rule, the number of recorded rape cases in the country has increased significantly in recent years, with women from marginalized communities finding themselves particularly at risk.<sup>36</sup> The 2024 South African elections marked an



## South Africa: Can the new coalition government deliver on gender equality?

important turning point. For the first time since the end of apartheid, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) won only 40 percent of the vote, thereby losing its parliamentary majority. Although the party still dominates the new government, it now governs in coalition with nine other parties. The ANC's declining popularity indicates that young South Africans, who make up a growing share of voters, have a weaker connection to the party than previous generations.<sup>37</sup> In general, South Africans lack trust in the country's political elites: according to Afrobarometer, most people report low levels of confidence in both the ruling party and the opposition.<sup>38</sup>

Over the past three decades, the ANC's strong commitment to gender parity has ensured that South African women are well-represented in politics. Although there is no mandatory quota that all parties have to adhere to, the ANC in 1994 adopted a 30 percent voluntary candidate quota which it expanded to 50 percent in 2009. As the ANC's electoral fortunes have declined, however, parties with weaker parity commitments have gained ground. The 2024 election thus brought a small decrease in the number of women parliamentarians in the National Assembly, with 177 elected compared to 179 in 2019. Women still make up 55 percent of the ANC parliamentary faction and 58 percent of left-populist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) representatives, but only 34 percent of Democratic Alliance (DA) parliamentarians and 23 percent of representatives of the newly founded uMkhonto weSizwe party (MK) delegation.<sup>39</sup> South Africa still outperforms

other countries on the continent on many metrics of inclusion. Of the 14,866 candidates reported by the Electoral Commission of South Africa, 42 percent were women and 32 percent were under the age of 40.<sup>40</sup> The new cabinet is below the gender parity threshold reached in 2019, yet it still includes 14 women ministers, 44 percent of the total.<sup>41</sup> At the subnational level, women make up 47 percent of executive council members and 44 percent of representatives in provincial legislatures—though only two out of the nine provinces are led by women premiers.<sup>42</sup>

*The key question surrounding the new government is whether it will be able to deliver on the vast challenges facing South African women. Echoing the challenges seen in the Dominican Republic and India, South Africa has one of the highest rates of femicide and gender-based violence in the world.*

Yet gender issues were largely absent from the campaign trail, with corruption, service delivery, youth discontent, and inequality dominating the political discourse.<sup>43</sup>

In the 1990s, the ANC's women leaders wielded significant influence through newly established gender equality institutions and passed a series of



progressive gender equality reforms.<sup>44</sup> Yet many of these laws have been unevenly implemented. Women's political representation has steadily increased, but the country's gender equality machinery has become less effective over time, due to a mix of corruption, infighting, and insufficient resources.<sup>45</sup> The ANC has also used its political dominance to repress internal dissent, which has made it more difficult for women politicians to push for change.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, the South African women's movement has become more fragmented than it was in the early post-apartheid years. It is divided between professionalized organizations that are relatively removed from the grassroots and struggle with fundraising, community organizations focused primarily on daily welfare issues, and momentary mass movements that flare up around specific causes but quickly dissipate, such as the #TotalShutdown campaign against gender-based violence.<sup>47</sup>

The parties now forming the new government have varying ideological orientations. The ANC continues to pay lip service to women's rights, but it has failed to put forward innovative ideas and made little progress on reform implementation.<sup>48</sup> The DA, on the other hand, emphasizes women's safety through policing and justice reforms while also calling for smaller government, individual empowerment, and market-driven reforms. The Inkatha Freedom Party has endorsed a more conservative, traditionalist stance.<sup>49</sup> The opposition is also divided, with the EFF calling for radical structural transformation and the MK Party supporting customary law on gender matters.<sup>50</sup> It remains to be seen whether women across these various parties will find common ground to push for greater political attention to gender issues, and whether the wider women's movement can exert sufficient external pressure to catalyze action.





## Sri Lanka: A political shift brings more women into politics

Sri Lanka's 2024 parliamentary election brought a historic increase in women's political representation, spurred in large parts by the unexpected rise of the leftist National People's Power (NPP) party. Although the country has a long legacy of female leadership—Sirimavo Bandaranaike was elected as the world's first female prime minister in 1960—few women have held senior political positions in recent decades. Heading into the 2024 election, Sri Lanka counted only 12 women among 225 parliamentarians (5.3 percent), and only one woman served in the executive cabinet.<sup>51</sup>

In the absence of a national-level quota, women have struggled to make inroads in Sri Lanka's political parties. Obstacles include the high cost of campaigns, gatekeeping by male politicians, as well as hate speech and attacks by political rivals.<sup>52</sup> These hurdles are particularly severe for women from minority communities. For instance, very few Tamil women have been elected to parliament, though many engage politically by advocating for justice for war-affected communities or fighting for better service delivery.<sup>53</sup> Since 2018, the implementation of a local government quota has increased women's subnational representation from 2 percent to almost a quarter.<sup>54</sup> However, the quota has also run into stubborn implementation hurdles in different parts of the country.

Against this backdrop, Sri Lankans went to the polls in September 2024 to choose a new president. The election came in the wake of a severe economic crisis rooted in excessive government borrowing.

In a clear sign of frustration with the ruling class, voters handed a victory to leftist Anura Kumara Disسانayake, who ran an anti-elite campaign and promised to renegotiate the country's deal with the International Monetary Fund.<sup>55</sup> Once elected, Disسانayake promptly called for snap parliamentary elections, hoping to win a majority for his party.<sup>56</sup> This bet paid off: the NPP coalition won 159 parliamentary seats, thus gaining a more than two-thirds majority. In a country that remains regionally and ethnically divided, the party's emphasis on good governance and anti-corruption allowed it to make significant gains among the country's historically marginalized Tamil and Muslim communities, despite the NPP's Sinhala nationalist background.<sup>57</sup>

These political changes brought several wins for women's political representation. First, Disسانayake appointed Harini Amarasuriya—an academic and one of the three NPP parliamentarians serving since 2019—as the nation's third female prime minister.<sup>58</sup> Second, a record number of 22 women were elected to parliament, 20 of whom ran under the NPP banner.<sup>59</sup> Women now make up 10 percent of the new parliament—a still limited share, but an improvement relative to the last election.<sup>60</sup>

This uptick was rooted in a notable increase in women candidates: there were a total of 109 women candidates vying for parliament, up from 38 in 2020.<sup>61</sup> In another sign of change, few of the women elected to parliament are connected to powerful male politicians. Instead, the group includes several lawyers, teachers, business owners, and community organizers.<sup>62</sup>



*Three newly elected women parliamentarians also come from the historically marginalized Malaiyaha Tamil community—the first women descendants of the country’s plantation workers to enter parliament.<sup>63</sup>*

Ahead of the election, the NPP made some concerted efforts to integrate women into its party structures. Over the past several years, Amarasuriya together with other women leaders have worked to organize women in the party and push for a party-internal 50 percent candidate quota. No such measure was implemented ahead of the polls, and women ultimately made up only 12 percent of NPP candidates. Despite this, the party appears to have benefited from greater participation by younger, educated women, many of whom were inspired to get involved in electoral politics following the mass protests over the government’s economic mismanagement in 2022.<sup>64</sup> Going forward, the new government has promised to prioritize democracy and national unity, though the most pressing challenge will likely be the country’s economic stabilization. With respect to gender equality, the new government has signaled that it may not push for a reform of the country’s discriminatory Muslim personal law, despite the long-standing demands of Muslim women’s rights groups.<sup>65</sup>



# Trends beyond numbers

## Stubborn barriers for women in politics

The elections of the past year showed once again that women politicians around the world face remarkably similar structural and institutional barriers. For one, patriarchal norms—including within families and households—continue to constrain women’s political engagement in many places, as women’s responsibility for childcare and domestic work leaves them with less time and fewer resources to engage in electoral politics. Male relatives, particularly in culturally conservative contexts, often resist their participation. Financial barriers represent another recurring constraint: whether in the Dominican Republic, the United States, or in India, running for office can be expensive, and women tend to have less private wealth and more limited access to private fundraising networks.

In the absence of strong legislative quotas or party-internal targets, male-dominated political parties also rarely prioritize the systematic recruitment, mentorship, and nomination of women candidates, whether because of implicit biases or their perception that voters will penalize women candidates. Not surprisingly, women politicians performed worst in countries that lack any form of (implemented) national quota or parity mandate, including in Bhutan, India, and the Maldives.

*In contrast, countries that have reached or come close to reaching gender parity, such as Mexico, Namibia, Rwanda, Senegal, and South Africa, have all implemented strong legislative or party-internal gender equality requirements, typically in response to women’s sustained political mobilization and advocacy.*

Violence, abuse, and harassment is another near-universal constraint. Over the past year, women candidates across new and consolidated democracies faced targeted and gender-specific attacks. In Ireland, for instance, women and politicians from a migrant background were targeted disproportionately with online and offline abuse.<sup>66</sup> Politically active women in El Salvador as well as Tunisia faced psychological intimidation, sexual violence, and online hate speech.<sup>67</sup> In Mexico, meanwhile, an electoral court reversed an opposition candidate’s election victory, arguing that she had committed gender-based political violence against her opponent. The case highlights that even though impunity for politically motivated gender-based violence remains a major problem, legal efforts to address such abuse and intimidation can also become politicized.<sup>68</sup>



## Deepfakes and online violence against women leaders

From “Swifties for Trump” t-shirts to a fake recording of a Slovakian journalist and politician discussing electoral manipulation, the 2024 super election year was marked by the increasing use of generative AI in election campaigns.

*New publicly accessible tools have made it easier than ever to create fake audio, images, or videos that often spread widely before they are identified. The gendered impact of these tools is clear: 98 percent of deepfakes online are pornographic in nature, and 99 percent target women.<sup>69</sup>*

Over the past year, there were numerous instances of deepfakes being used to tarnish the credibility and image of women political leaders and paint them as unfit for political office. In Moldova, for instance, President Maia Sandu, who was running for reelection, faced an onslaught of gendered digital attacks and hate speech, including deepfakes.<sup>70</sup> In the United States, the American Sunlight Project documented more than 35,000 instances of deepfake content depicting 26 members of Congress—25 of them women—across pornographic sites.<sup>71</sup> An investigation by Channel 4 News uncovered a similar pattern in the UK, where more than 400 digitally altered images of over 30 prominent UK women politicians surfaced on a sexually explicit website ahead of the election.<sup>72</sup> In Mexico, now-President Sheinbaum also had to contend with fake AI-generated audio alongside online attacks focused on her appearance and credentials.<sup>73</sup> Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni is currently seeking compensation from two alleged perpetrators who uploaded pornographic videos with her likeness.<sup>74</sup>

So far, policy and legislative responses to this trend have been piecemeal and insufficient. South Korea, which in 2024 passed legislation that prohibits the creation and distribution of non-consensual pornographic deepfakes and makes violations punishable by prison sentences, is ahead of the global curve. The EU’s Digital Services Act, for instance, says almost nothing about deepfake porn. In the absence of regulation, online media platforms have few incentives to take enforcement seriously. As it stands, the problem risks further discouraging women from entering electoral politics and burdening women leaders who are already subjected to heightened public scrutiny.



## Anti-democratic headwinds

*Several elections held over the past year showcased how democratic erosion and institutional decay continue to put women's hard-fought political gains at risk.*

In El Salvador, women's parliamentary representation increased even as President Nayib Bukele consolidated his power. But the broader political environment grew more hostile to women's activism and mobilization. Organizations that protect women's rights are under increasing attack by state authorities as well as far-right conservative groups, particularly if they speak out against the government's human rights violations. Many activists have been wrongly accused of gang activity by anti-feminist extremists, and public activities like marches and protests have been restricted. Public advocacy for women's and LGBTQ rights has thus become a risky endeavor.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, there are still women leaders in civil society and in electoral politics—such as parliamentarian Claudia Ortiz of the VAMOS party—who mobilize against femicides and gender-based violence and for better protections for caregivers and precarious workers.<sup>76</sup>

In Tunisia, President Kais Saied's reelection in a flawed presidential election reaffirmed the country's rapid slide into autocracy over the past several years. Since 2021, the new regime has reversed many of the gender equality gains of the past decade. A new electoral law introduced in 2022 eliminated the principle of gender parity in elected assemblies—one of the key accomplishments of women's rights activists following the 2011 revolution. As a result,

women made up only 11.5 percent of candidates in the 2022 election, called after Saied abruptly dissolved parliament, and they now represent 15.7 percent of sitting parliamentarians (compared to 35.9 percent in early 2019).<sup>77</sup>

*Moreover, misogynistic attacks on women leaders and activists have escalated since Saied's ascent to power, often spurred on by the president himself. Law 58, which is meant to protect women from sexual harassment and all forms of violence, has not been fully implemented, and many dissidents, including women, have been targeted with baseless criminal investigations.<sup>78</sup>*

In this context of rising repression, Saied's appointment of Najla Bouden as Tunisia's first woman prime minister rings hollow, particularly since she has done little to advance gender equality since her appointment in 2021.

In India, Pakistan, and Thailand, women activists and politicians who challenge the government and illiberal forces in society similarly face violence and threats from both state authorities and extremist non-state actors. Together, these examples underscore that the erosion of the rule of law and the closing of political and civic space foster a more hostile environment for women's collective political participation—even if individual women can still gain access to leadership roles if they are loyal and subservient to the ruling party or leader.





## Intensifying anti-rights backlash

Adding to the challenge of democratic erosion is the increasing mobilization of illiberal, anti-feminist movements in many parts of the world. Latin America has been at the forefront of this global trend: over the past decade, progressive movements in the region have faced intensifying pushback from conservative and religious organizations and institutions that are contesting changes in traditional gender norms and hierarchies. In some countries, these counter-movements have found allies in government, as was the case under Jair Bolsonaro's administration in Brazil, and, more recently, under Javier Milei in Argentina and Nayib Bukele in El Salvador. Bukele, for instance, after his re-election in 2024 promised to crack down on "gender ideology" in public school curricula—remarks that came shortly after he attended a gathering of far-right and evangelical groups and politicians in the United States.<sup>79</sup> In the Dominican Republic, meanwhile, activists' efforts to amend the country's strict abortion ban have run into concerted resistance from religious groups.<sup>80</sup>

In South Asia, pushback against feminist leaders and movements similarly emanates from right-wing nationalist and religious groups as well as male-dominated online communities. In Pakistan, for instance, women marching against gender-based violence on International Women's Day have faced online death and rape threats as well as legal cases accusing them of violating blasphemy laws—which meant that in 2024, fewer women were willing to publicly demonstrate for their rights.<sup>81</sup>

*Indian activists, on the other hand, are contending with the rise of exclusionary Hindu nationalism*

*that endorses traditional gender norms while at the same time casting Muslim men as "patriarchal oppressors" and minimizing violence against Muslim communities.<sup>82</sup>*

In the Middle East and North Africa, meanwhile, advocates for women's rights are caught between opponents who claim that progressive gender norms are Western colonial imports and a Western foreign policy and a donor community that many activists view as implicated in the region's crises, including the ongoing devastation in Gaza.<sup>83</sup>

Over the past year, anti-gender movements also influenced politics in numerous European countries. In Georgia, the ruling Georgian Dream party, which was re-elected in disputed polls in October 2024, passed a wide-ranging anti-LGBTQ bill that bans same-sex marriage and depictions of sexual minorities in the media, among other provisions.<sup>84</sup> In August, the Bulgarian parliament similarly passed a law prohibiting "propaganda" for "non-traditional sexual orientations" in schools, which gained the support of not only ultra-conservative, pro-Russian parties but also of the country's center-right.<sup>85</sup> These examples underscore that political movements contesting changes in gender norms and hierarchies are continuing to gain ground across different regions, often fueled by transnational networking, local religious institutions and communities, and rising political polarization. In the years ahead, sustained pushback against progressive gender norms will likely pose new hurdles for those seeking to equalize women's and marginalized minorities' access to political power and leadership.



## Women shaping politics beyond elections backlash

*Despite this challenging global context, the past year also brought many instances of women and their allies mobilizing for democracy, equality, and rights. In Australia, France, India, Ireland, Mexico and Turkey, women took to the streets in large numbers to protest against femicides and gender-based violence, an endemic problem that cuts across national and regional boundaries.*

In Iran, authorities halted the implementation of a stricter law on women's mandatory dress, likely fearing the resurgence of the "Women, Life, Freedom" protests that swept over the country after the 2022 death of Mahsa Amini.<sup>86</sup> The decision showed that women's political mobilization can shape government action even in highly repressive and undemocratic contexts.

In several countries, women played key roles in pro-democracy movements. In Bangladesh, female students were instrumental in the protest movement that brought down the Awami League and Sheikh Hasina's repressive government in August 2024. After brutal attacks on student protesters by police forces, for instance, female students at Dhaka University rapidly organized counter-protests, coming together across cultural and geographic divides. The new interim government, formed after Hasina's resignation, includes four female civil society leaders, though it currently lacks a female representative from the student movement.<sup>87</sup>

In South Korea, on the other hand, women were front and center of the protests against President Yoon Suk Yeol's decision to declare martial law in December 2024. Women have traditionally been marginalized in Korean politics. Yet the protests, which were successful at preventing martial law and stripping Yoon of his presidential powers, signaled that younger women are increasingly engaged, mobilized in no small part by Yoon's conservative gender politics. The May 2022 presidential election was marked by a significant gender gap, with young men supporting Yoon in much higher numbers than young women.<sup>88</sup>

Together, these diverse examples underscore the critical roles that women, whether as activists or ordinary citizens, continue to play to defend democracy, rights, and gender equality, even in difficult and dangerous political contexts.



# Looking ahead

The 2024 super year election year did not spur any major uptick in women's political representation. In contrast, the picture that emerges is one of stagnation and significant negative headwinds. Given the difficult global landscape, it is worrisome that according to the latest OECD data, the share of bilateral overseas development aid with gender equality objectives dropped for the first time in a decade in 2021–2022, including in the government and civil society sector. At USD 432 million, bilateral funding for women's rights organizations remained low.<sup>89</sup> The next few years are likely to bring further funding cuts, with major donor governments such as the Netherlands and the United States dramatically scaling back their assistance. The Trump administration's attacks on the U.S. Agency for International Development and its termination of almost all democracy and rights funding are likely to have particularly far-reaching effects.<sup>90</sup>

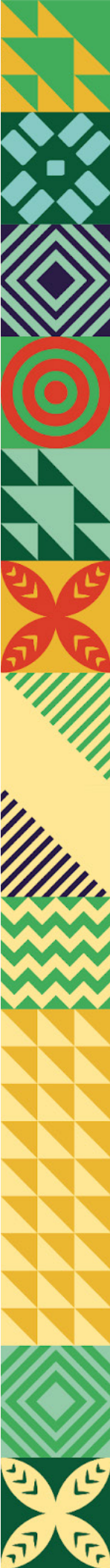
Yet for advocates, reformers, and their local and international allies, there are important lessons that emerge from the electoral contests held over the past year:

- Despite global challenges such as democratic erosion and far-right anti-gender mobilization, the global landscape is *politically varied*. It is critical to pay attention not only to countries registering decreases in women's representation, but also to those who continue to make gains, from Mexico to Sri Lanka. Moreover, in challenging political contexts, celebrating and learning from the resilience of women leaders remains important.
- Women politicians confront both *longstanding and new barriers*. Some challenges, such as women's lack of access to political financing, weaker political networks, and patriarchal sociocultural norms, are well-known. They have no silver bullet solutions but require sustained investments in supporting female role models, connecting politically interested women with each other and with allies and funders, driving reforms within political parties and in party and campaign finance regulations, and bringing families and communities on board. Other barriers, such as cyberbullying, digital surveillance, and deepfakes, are much newer and less well-understood. They will require targeted awareness-raising, regulatory and enforcement measures, and communications as well as safety support for women political leaders.
- *Legislative frameworks make a difference.* Parity requirements in particular transform the landscape for women's political representation, as do quota laws that are carefully designed to fit the existing electoral system and do not confine women to secondary political roles. In most cases, these frameworks are the result of sustained political mobilization and coalition-building by women in politics and in civil society. However, quota laws typically have to be revised and improved over time to close loopholes and ensure their effective implementation.



- Targeted interventions, including civic education and election management reforms, can help *close the gender gap in voting*, as the case of India underscores. Women's increasing electoral participation can in turn incentivize parties to appeal to women voters. Policymakers and advocates should draw on the growing empirical scholarship on voter mobilization initiatives to invest in effective and context-attuned reforms.
- In contexts of democratic erosion, women's political leadership often declines or becomes co-opted by the ruling party. In these settings, offering *solidarity and support to women leaders defending democratic and human rights principles*—whether in civil society, in local government and political opposition parties, or in exile—becomes particularly important.
- Women remain *highly engaged in protest movements and civic advocacy* around the world. Fostering connections between women's grassroots mobilization and formal political institutions and processes is essential, both to encourage more women—particularly from marginalized communities—to go into electoral politics and to hold elected politicians accountable to their promises and constituencies.

1. V-Dem defines liberal democracies as democracies that not only hold free and fair elections but also ensure the rule of law, respect for civil liberties, and constraints on the executive by the judiciary and the legislature. Electoral democracies, on the other hand, hold free and fair multiparty elections and fulfill a minimal level of institutional prerequisites such as freedom of association and freedom of expression, yet do not satisfy these liberal principles. Electoral autocracies hold multi-party elections for the executive, but they fall short of democratic standards due to widespread irregularities, limitations on party competition, or other violations. Closed autocracies either do not hold elections, or there is no meaningful competition between political parties (e.g. one-party regimes). See Anna Lührmann, Staffan I. Lindberg, and Marcus Tannenbergh, “Regimes In the World (RIW): A Robust Regime Type Measure based on V-Dem,” Working Paper SERIES 2017:47 (University of Gothenburg: The Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2017); and Joseph Cerrone, “European Far Right Continued Electoral Advance in 2024, Despite Notable Setbacks,” Illiberalism Studies Program, December 13, 2024, <https://www.illiberalism.org/european-far-right-continued-electoral-advance-in-2024-despite-notable-setbacks/>.
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3. These percentages may change as the election results for December 2024 are finalized.
4. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Barbados, and Iceland all have a female head of state and a female head of government, which means that there are currently 27 women heads of state/government across 24 countries (including Kosovo). The January 2024 data is drawn from UN Women, “Women Political Leaders 2024,” <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2024/06/poster-women-political-leaders-2024>.
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