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A woman's work

100 years after many women in Europe won the right to vote, Drude Dahlerup, author of Has Democracy Failed Women, explains the challenges that remain in the search for equal representation

Your book claims democracy's not working for women, at a time when there is a higher proportion of women in parliaments than ever before. Aren't things moving in the right direction?

Yes and no. If you'd asked me five years ago I would have been very optimistic. Right now, however, I think there's a backlash. If you look at all the elections held in 2017, in 18 of those, women's representation increased, one kept the status quo and in 15 there was a decrease, including Germany. I think that we in Europe used to believe that gender equality is getting better, whereas many people in the global South know it goes up and down. We have to realise it's not easy. Gender equality doesn't just come with time. Male dominance is being reproduced in a lot of places, and there are some conservative trends we have to watch out for.

You've advised governments around the world on how to include women in the political process. What are the main reasons women are excluded, and how can institutions rectify this?

We are celebrating 100 years of women's suffrage, and in Europe we are below 30% [female representation in politics]. The main reason is the recruitment process. When people enter the polling station, the names are already on the ballot and most voters have no idea where they come from. That's what I discuss in the book: the secret garden of nominations, and who controls them. There is a tendency that men in power recruit other men.

At the same time there is a discourse about women not being qualified or not being interested in politics. But there are so many qualified women in civil society organisations, enough to fill all the parliaments in the world, so that's not the question. We have to shift the focus from this alleged lack of qualification of women to the lack of

inclusiveness on the part of political institutions.

So it's a wrong diagnosis: women are capable and interested, and it's the gatekeepers who are stopping them?

Exactly. And in most political systems, the political parties are the gatekeepers. Among all of us who are working on women's empowerment, there's a lot of focus on capacity building of women: programmes giving women education in how politics work and how to be a candidate. That's good, but the main problem is not women's lack of capacity. The main problem is that women are being kept out, and it's very hard to break this male dominance.

On my consultancy missions around the world, I hear again and again that the problem behind women's under-representation is that women don't vote for women. I have heard this, for instance, in Bhutan, Morocco and Egypt. But this is not the right diagnosis – and by the way, unless you have surveys on individual voting, we don't know, because voting is secret, isn't it. The few studies available show that the main problem is that male voters don't vote for women.

But now there is a new discourse in the world, it's a discourse of parity. It's in the Sustainable Development Goals, which state that there needs to be full and effective participation of women in all decision-making. It's not about some more women, it's about parity. And at the same time, in the past two decades, we have seen this idea of gender quotas in politics emerge, which is very controversial and at the same time very popular.

There are 89 countries that have adopted gender quotas by law, binding for all political parties, and then there around 30 countries where some political parties, usually green and left parties, have voluntary party quotas. This is an amazing tool; done in the right way it can make historical leaps. Like in Rwanda or Senegal where women's representation increased 20-30 percentage points in one election. It's also unpopular, because people say: Oh, it's against the principle of merit. And then I have to ask how qualified the men are. Maybe it's also unpopular because it's effective! But it's not a question of being for or against quotas. In my book I discuss the many types of quota, because some are successful and others are not. They have to match the electoral and political system in the country.

What might a successful quota system look like?

In India, 33 per cent of all seats at local level are reserved for women, and there are reserved seats for scheduled castes. So in the very patriarchal Indian countryside, there are about one million women serving on local councils. There are examples where the elected

women have little power, but also many fantastic examples of women putting girls' education, clean water, violence against women on the political agenda. You have to work on this, and you have to build women's capacity, but it's a revolution and it would have taken 1,000 years without a quota system!

Today, most Latin American countries have adopted laws regulating the gender composition of the electoral lists. It started in Argentina in 1991 and now the whole region has it. Candidate quotas are just about women being candidates – let's say at least 30 or 40 per cent of the candidates must be women (or men) – but that's only the first step. You can have 50 per cent women on the list but if the political parties place all of them at the bottom of the list in a PR system, none of them will get elected. The best example is Tunisia. After the Jasmine Revolution [in 2010-11], they made this radical quota system that we call the zipper system, where male and female candidates are alternated throughout the list. So men, women, men, women, men, women – or starting with the woman. In the first election women won 27 per cent of the seats, and now they have 32 per cent, the highest in the Arab world. In many post-conflict countries, we see a political will to include men and women in politics

Our team at Stockholm University, with the International IDEA and Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), have constructed a website showing which countries have quotas and of which type.

What's your answer to those who say it should be meritocratic?

The question of merit is a false argument. It's a way of keeping women out. As part of an IPU delegation, I once had the opportunity to discuss the issue of women in politics in the Egyptian senate. Most of them had been elected for the first time, and while the Salafist MPs said women should stay at home, the Muslim Brotherhood and the secular MPs argued that it was a question of merit. I could have asked: How qualified are you? In general, you don't become a candidate because you are the most qualified. It's because you know somebody who picks you and says: I think you should be a candidate. And, by the way, being a politician is not a question of university education. It's a question of representation. An uneducated woman in India, active in the Dalit movement, can be an excellent representative.

There's been a huge backlash against women in politics, especially on social media. This must put a number of women off politics. What should governments do to legislate against this?

One thing is to go after Facebook and Twitter and say: You are the responsible editors here. You have to do something. Governments

should do everything they can of course and put it into the criminal code, but if it comes out of cyberspace, this is very difficult.

There's a Danish politician with a Turkish background, Özlem Cekic, who courageously wrote a book called *Mama, Why Do They Hate You?* She found some of the men who had attacked her online and invited them to coffee. Some of them are just social losers who don't really know who she is and what she stands for, but they've had some beer and they feel empowered. They would otherwise just say things like that in the bar, but now they can post it on social media.

But then there's the other trend which is much more serious, a real campaign against women. For a long time I said, this is just the old patriarchal attitudes. Now I agree there is new resistance to women becoming more visible; there are more women ministers, cabinet ministers, prime ministers, even if it's still a minority. This is a new trend because women have got stronger. And it's a very dangerous one, where there's an open anti-women movement. I see in the future increased polarisation between feminists (of all genders) and anti-feminists.

At the same time, women have so much power now that even if there are serious attempts to keep women down, there will be protests, as we saw with Women's Marches and the global #MeToo movement. MeToo is fantastic: no matter what happens now, it's already changed what women accept, or more or less accept, or don't protest against, and it's influencing men's behaviour. This is a kind of political manifestation that changes gender structures, even in countries where it doesn't reach the political level.

Increasingly, power is moving from the local to the international level. Governments are pooling their sovereignty and have less of a grip on tools that could foster equality. Does this present a challenge?

Women have more power now, even if it's still male-dominated, at the national and local level. But increasingly, power moves to multinational companies, which is the biggest problem, and to global governance structures. If you take the global governance institutions, there are opportunities and there are problems. There is a little bit of an opening in the way that, for instance, the World Bank, which previously didn't want to speak to women's organisations at all, has now opened up somewhat: it has a high-level panel on women including a UN Woman's executive director. They have gender units and gender programmes. Women's presence is much lower at the global level than at the national level, but there are some openings, which the transnational feminist movements work hard to take advantage of.

Some countries see the EU having more power in equality policy as something good, while for countries like the Scandinavian nations, where we have previously done much better than the average, this can be a problem on certain issues. It's very important to have the UN; it's a big opportunity to change the discourse, and the new, global discourse of gender equality has emerged through the debates in the UN. But you have to work on representation at a global, national and local level. It doesn't come by itself. Women's representation is worse at the global level than at a national level, absolutely. But it's a new battlefield and that is why the transnational feminist movements and the UN are so very important. So don't give up. This is where we have to work now.

Has Democracy Failed Women by Drude Dahlerup is out now in English on Polity Press

The interview was conducted by Ellie Mears.



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Drude Dahlerup is Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Stockholm. She has published extensively on electoral gender quotas, Politics and Gender, social movements, history of women's movements and feminist theory. Her recent book *Has Democracy Failed Women?* she argues that political institutions, including political parties, are the real gatekeepers to elected positions all over the world, but they need to be much more inclusive.