

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

## War, Revolution, and the Expansion of Women's Political Representation

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Women's political rights and their exercise of political citizenship globally have often expanded more rapidly in times of conflict, crisis, and revolution. The decline of empires after World Wars I and II and the creation of new nations served as a catalyst for the adoption of women's suffrage. Civil wars and revolutions have had similar outcomes in advancing women's political citizenship. This essay brings together several disparate literatures on World War I, World War II, wars of independence, revolution, and post-1990 civil wars and connects them to show how women's political rights and citizenship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have often been linked to conflict. In doing so, I highlight a notable pathway by which women's rights expansions occurred: conflict led to changes in the political elite and ruling class, resulting in the necessity to rewrite constitutions and other rules of the polity. During these critical junctures, women's rights activists gained opportunities to advance their demands. The context of changing international gender norms also influenced these moments. I consider two key moments in the worldwide expansion of political citizenship: the struggle for women's suffrage and the struggle to increase women's representation in local and national representative bodies.

While there are multiple paths to expanding women's citizenship, the opportunities that emerge with "critical junctures," such as the end of conflict and revolution, show that the expansion of women's political rights can be accelerated as a byproduct of such social rupture, especially when combined with pressure from women's movements and activists. These "critical junctures" are short periods of time which increase the probability that actors can intervene to bring about long-term institutional transformation (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007).

Not all types of conflicts allow for the expansion of citizenship rights for women such as most interstate conflicts, coups d'état, isolated terrorist attacks,

proxy wars, localized conflicts, or smaller rebellions because of their limited scope. These do not necessitate the establishment of new institutions because they do not create deep enough ruptures in the political elite or ruling classes to open up possibilities for new actors to assert themselves (Tripp 2015). However, World Wars I and II both set in motion processes that ultimately led to the demise of empires and the independence of new nations, a process which ended with the extension of suffrage to women after World War I and universal suffrage after World War II. What distinguishes the processes set in motion by World Wars I and II from other interstate conflict is that these world wars ended in a major reconfiguration of political and economic power in the form of new nations. Most interstate wars do not necessitate such major restructuring to allow for expanding women's rights.

## World War I

Women won the right to vote in at least 24 European countries in the six years following World War I with the demise of large empires such as the Ottoman, Russian, German, and the Austro-Hungarian Empires and the formation of new nations. In the United States and Canada, there was an impetus to expand democracy after World War I, leading to the extension of the legal voting rights to most women, but not to all minority women right away.

The fact that World War I ended with many countries adopting universal suffrage was indeed related to the catalyzing effect of the war, as historians such as Birgitta Bader-Zaar (2009) have argued. It opened up new opportunity structures that allowed suffragists to realize their goals. The events took place against the backdrop of the transnational diffusion of ideas and mobilization around women's suffrage, which had only gained steam at the turn of the twentieth century (Ramirez, Soysal, and Shanahan 1997). However, there were significant national and party differences between countries. In the United States after the war, President Woodrow Wilson, who had long opposed women's suffrage, was keen to strengthen democracy, and expanding the vote was part of that effort. The main drama played out at the state level in the effort to get states to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which was finally passed in 1920. In Britain, women's participation in the war effort helped some parliamentarians change their minds about female suffrage. However, the main factors had to do with the incremental way the women's vote was obtained; the initial age limitations made it palatable to the majority of parliamentarians (Pugh 1978). In Finland, the Baltic countries, Poland, and Hungary, women saw the fight for suffrage as part of the nationalist struggle. Thus, the impetus to change the law varied from country to country; however, the war had set in motion processes that allowed for the adoption of women's suffrage.

## World War II

The decline of the British, French, and Portuguese Empires after World War II and the rise of independence movements led to the formation of new nations and

another wave of expanded voting rights, not only for women but for men as well. Some countries became independent immediately after World War II, such as Indonesia, Philippines, Jordan, Syria, India and Pakistan. Others took longer as they made their case to the United Nations Trusteeship Council. Some colonized peoples had to carry out armed struggle in order to obtain independence, particularly those countries that had large white settler populations, such as Algeria, Kenya, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and Rhodesia.

In Africa, most women obtained the right to vote alongside men in the process of obtaining independence. Under colonial rule, the right to vote had often expanded incrementally based on property ownership, education, race, age, and the persistence of laws that placed additional hurdles on certain minority groups. For example, in some of Africa's settler states, white women already had the right to vote prior to independence, but the majority of the population was denied the vote until after independence. By the end of World War II, the norm of universal suffrage had been established internationally.

## Revolution

Revolution has also expanded women's rights. Finland became the first country in Europe to grant universal suffrage and women's right to run for legislative office in 1906, following the 1905 revolution against Russian imperial domination and Russia's 1904–05 war with Japan. Finland's national parliament was the first in the world to seat women, as 19 women were elected to office in 1907 out of a total of 200 parliamentarians. These events followed the 1905 revolution in Russia, often referred to as the First Russian Revolution. This involved peasant unrest and strikes and mutinies throughout Russia, but also Finland, which had been a grand duchy of Russia since 1809. The 1905 revolution took place on the heels of Russia's military defeat in the Russo-Japanese War and opened up the possibility for parliamentary reform. Women had sought suffrage for some time, but it was during Finland's bid for autonomy that the czar granted their demands for a new unicameral parliament and universal suffrage at the national level. Finland became independent in 1917 as a result of the Russian Revolution. In Russia, women won the right to vote in the context of the 1917 Russian Revolution. The other 14 Soviet republics followed suit, with some delays as in Uzbekistan. Thus, women gained suffrage with changes in the political elite in Finland and Russia.

## Civil War

Women's political citizenship globally has also increased more rapidly after civil war when there was a change in political leadership. For example, in African postconflict countries, the numbers of women represented in parliament, local governments, and even in cabinets increased beginning in the mid-1990s, with the introduction of constitutional and legislative changes and formal and informal gender quotas that favored women's candidacies in elections (Tripp 2015). In

**Table 1.** Women's Political Representation in Africa, 2020.

	Major Conflict	No Major Conflict
Legislative representation	29%	19%
Ministers	27%	21%
Local government	27%	21%

Sources: Author's elaboration based on IPU (2020); UNECE (2020); World Bank (2020).

Africa, the timing of the end of many conflicts coincided with new international pressures to increase women's political representation.

After the 1994 genocide and civil war, Rwanda became the country with the highest proportion of women legislators in the world, with women holding 61% of parliamentary seats in 2022. Postconflict Liberia was the first African country to elect a woman president. In Algeria, women's proportion of legislative seats increased from 2% in 1987, prior to the civil war between the government and Islamist extremists (Black Decade) (1991–2002), to 32% after the 2012 elections. Most postconflict countries adopted some form of gender quota to increase representation. Namibia, under the leadership of the hegemonic party, the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), gained independence from South Africa in 1990 after waging a 24-year-long war. In Namibia today, more than 46% of the legislative seats and 45% of village councils are headed by women. As Table 1 shows, the differences between postconflict and non-postconflict countries remain visible, though they have diminished somewhat since 2010, when they were more pronounced.

The patterns found in Africa were evident in other parts of the world, such as Nepal, East Timor, Serbia, and Nicaragua, where women hold 47%, 39%, 38% and 47% of the legislative seats, respectively—among the highest rates globally. Nepal, for example, was embroiled in a civil war between the government and Maoist forces from 1996 to 2006. The Women's Alliance for Peace, Power, Democracy and the Constituent Assembly, a coalition of nongovernmental organizations, sought to be included in peace negotiations and the Constituent Assembly. As a result of these and other lobbying efforts, Nepalese women made major gains in the new 2015 constitution, including adopting a one-third gender quota.

### Why is Crisis or Conflict a Catalyst?

The end of long-standing or bloody armed conflict has frequently had large positive impacts on women's legislative representation, above what could be explained by electoral institutions like quotas and democratization (Berry 2018; Hughes 2009; Tripp 2015; Webster, Chen, and Beardsley 2019). Revolutions, civil wars, and wars of independence that resulted in changes in political power and in class or economic forces created opportunity structures (e.g., peace talks, electoral and constitutional reform processes) that opened up possibilities for actors such as women's movements to press for reforms (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Changes in social relations and opportunity structures that can result in the expansion of citizenship for women.

	Civil War or War of Secession	Revolution	War of Liberation or Independence	Coup d'État	Interstate War or War of Annexation	Localized Conflict
Peace talks	√				√	
New constitutions	√	√	√			
New electoral rules	√	√	√			
Truth and reconciliation commission	√		√			

Women's experiences during war also gave them common cause, giving rise to demands such as increased female political representation. Where women's movements were not visible, the outcome for women's representation was less pronounced. The end of major conflict often disrupted existing gender roles and relations, thus giving impetus for reform.

Without such agency of the women's movement, it is rare that one sees the expansion of citizenship of women, but sometimes it has happened after war in response to international norm diffusion. Kemal Atatürk, for example, led an independence movement (1919–23) and established the Republic of Turkey. He abolished the remaining Ottoman Empire and imposed top-down reforms, giving women voting rights in local elections in 1930 and universal suffrage in 1934. Similarly, Tunisia's President Habib Bourguiba enacted a progressive Personal Status Code in 1956 after gaining independence from France. He also expanded rights for women by adopting universal education, equal employment, and equal consent to marriage, among other policies.

New international gender norms are another factor linking conflict with the expansion of women's citizenship in countries such as Turkey and Tunisia. In earlier periods, the norms were diffused through the suffrage movements which had global linkages. Today, we see the hand of United Nations (UN) agencies as well as increased donor dependence that influences postconflict outcomes. Much of this was a result of the UN Platform of Action that came out of the Fourth UN Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 and the 2000 UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which required UN member states to include women in peace-building processes.

There are many paths to the expansion of women's rights. One important pathway has involved wars or revolutions that result in changes in the political elite and the dominant economic interests. These conflicts open up opportunity structures that allow for actors to press for the expansion of women's political citizenship. Usually these actors are women's movements, but in some cases, these processes were spurred from above. This can be explained by the diffusion

of global norms, which plays an important role in almost all cases of the adoption of women's rights after conflict, even where local dynamics feature prominently.

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