


NOTES FROM THE FIELD

More Than a Journal: *Politics & Gender* and the Study of Women as National Leaders

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Politics & Gender has established its identity as the premier outlet dedicated to publishing path breaking research on gender and politics topics. The journal launched in 2005, the year I first started working in a tenure track position. While the academic influence the journal has had on countless substantive areas is of tremendous significance (and the subject of several contributions to this special anniversary issue), I aim primarily to focus on the personal influence *Politics & Gender* has had on my trajectory as a gender and politics scholar. The journal helped me establish a new area of research—women as national executives around the world. *Politics & Gender* has profoundly influenced my research profile and, at the same time, expanded an area of research that was considered outside the mainstream. As I came into my own professionally and academically, my ability to forge an identity as a leading scholar on women national executives has much to do with *Politics & Gender* and its stellar editors, reviewers, and readers. *Politics & Gender* is more than a journal. It is the embodiment of a supportive community built by scholars who set a standard of academic rigor but also collegiality, professionalism, and mentorship.

As both an undergraduate and graduate student, I had been drawn to the subject of women as national leaders. My background as a first generation American, the daughter of Pakistani immigrants, presented a paradox. The United States had never had a woman president, while Pakistan had a woman as prime minister, the late Benazir Bhutto. This was puzzling given the relatively higher social and political status of women in the US compared to Pakistan. This topic was quite salient to me when I would visit my extended family and faced several cultural and religious practices that constricted my behavior as a woman. From this question, 20 years and counting, my research agenda was launched. My work first uncovered the backgrounds of women leaders (Jalalzai 2004) and later the conditions that appeared to facilitate women's emergence as leaders

worldwide. Without more attention to these questions, scholars lacked an understanding of one of the most masculine institutions. Given that these positions were often some of the most influential within the country, women's continued absence also presented a major obstacle to women's full political empowerment.

To address this deficiency, I drafted one of my first eventual publications for *Politics & Gender*. The article was called "Women Rule: Shattering the Executive Glass Ceiling" (Jalalzai 2008). I do not think it would have been possible to put this area of research on the map without the commitment of the journal and its editors (Karen Beckwith and Lisa Baldez initially and, later, Kathleen Dolan). The journal showed its commitment to going outside the mainstream within the gender and politics subfield and supporting the next generation of scholars to answer critical questions. It sparked conversations and debates that continue to this day. We are now equipped with a much greater understanding of how and why women presidents and prime ministers emerge and the obstacles they still face in pursuing power and exercising it. Additionally, we have also seen the emergence of work examining the potential benefits of having women at the helm, whether through policymaking, selecting other women to influential offices, or through their roles as visible political symbols. Of course, this scholarship has also pointed out many limitations and constraints women face when they are in office and try to empower women. As may be expected given the sheer diversity of women, findings also suggest that not all women are necessarily interested in approaching their roles in ways that are different from their male counterparts. Some may even seek to curtail women's empowerment (Jalalzai 2019). Further, we see the backlash women face in some contexts when they try to improve women's positions (dos Santos and Jalalzai 2021).

Seminal work that had already been published in the journal proved essential to the framing of my 2008 article in addition to several articles and chapters, and books on the topic of women executives I published subsequently. While my research has focused on gender, I analyze women leaders specifically. There has not always been space to integrate approaches that utilize both a women in politics and a gender in politics approach. I credit the work of Karen Beckwith (2005), published in *Politics & Gender*, for demonstrating the necessity of bridging women and gender in politics research.

The need for research on women and politics persists...We still lack a wide range of knowledge, especially comparative and longitudinal, about women's political behavior, political beliefs and attitudes, means of organizing, behavior in governmental office, experience in campaigning, response to power inequalities, and exclusion from political power—among other concerns. The subfield of women and politics research still requires this basic investigatory, cumulative research (128-129).

As Beckwith also noted, however, the incorporation of women should be balanced by careful gender analysis which examines the socially constructed meanings of biological sex differences. (Beckwith 2005, 131). Seeing gender as a process provides a mechanism to analyze the ways political institutions are

connected to gendered constructs; this perspective has been pivotal to my research and remains as critical today. This has facilitated expanding knowledge on how political systems and positions are gendered and ways women are aided or hindered by gender norms, processes, and institutions. The journal is committed to publishing works employing a range of techniques and approaches, which is particularly suitable for the complex inquiries engaged.

When I first embarked on my work on women as national leaders, it is an understatement to say that the line of research of women prime ministers and presidents was not particularly popular or commonplace. Some of this was because of the sheer dearth of women in these positions. Still, their numbers were starting to go up rapidly by the early 2000s. The edited collection by Michael Genovese, *Women as National Leaders* (1993), comes to the top of my head as one of the few scholarly contributions at the time to this field of study. For the most part, however, the limited research was more about the tenures of women leaders and tended to unfold more like biographical overviews rather than gendered analyses that engaged institutional and structural aspects of women's governance. While certainly important, there was still an absence of more systematic studies about the facilitating conditions to women's inclusion in the executive and how paths and powers to executives shaped this in tandem with gendered norms and processes. Quantitative analysis on this subject did not exist, also limiting our understanding of women national leaders. With the growing numbers of women leaders, it was now possible to conduct more quantitative research. I should also point out that this was during a time when there was an explosion of excellent literature on women in parliament, including analyses of interventions facilitating women's presence, like legislative quotas (see Krook 2006). *Politics & Gender* showed a commitment to pushing the gender and politics research agenda beyond the typical realms and leaders examined.

It struggled as a graduate student and in my early years as an academic to find a place where I belonged. At academic conferences, I was often on panels completely unrelated to my subject area (aside from the panels being about women in politics, broadly construed). I would later cross paths with scholars who were interested in analyzing women in politics in a comparative framework. Moreover, though I am trained as a comparativist, I consider myself a global scholar. At times, the scope of my research (like my 2008 article) was truly worldwide. But other times, it was more regional or even about a single country. Across all these types of research, women executives stood at the forefront. There was a palpable difficulty in securing peer reviewers who could assess my research. Article reviews I received often indicated the reviewer's lack of expertise on the topic. While this is something that happens routinely in academia, it was the norm for me for a long time. I recall multiple instances when reviewer reports encouraged me to change my topic altogether. I should switch to an analysis of women mayors or governors. Or I should analyze American first ladies instead. In light of such comments, it is not a giant leap to think that perhaps your work is not important. To feel as though you and your research are not valued is commonplace, especially when you are first starting out in your academic year, to be sure. Multiple times, however, I received (unsolicited) advice to abandon my research

topic altogether because it was viewed as esoteric and not something that would yield important outcomes.

I am so thankful I did not heed the advice of some to change my research topic. In large part, this was because I would find people who helped me create my academic home. The network of amazing gender scholars, particularly the scholars analyzing comparative and global politics, lifted me up to where I am today. Many of them are now coauthors and friends. Most are not only active in the women and politics section of APSA, but they have also worked closely with the journal, whether on the editorial board, as authors, and/or as reviewers.

One of my most vivid memories about belonging was when I first started my tenure-track position. I was participating in an APSA pre-conference mentoring event where established gender and politics scholars in the field networked and provided career and research advice to junior faculty. Until that time, I had desperately lacked mentors in my field. Several professors and colleagues in my home departments were not interested in gender and politics. Some were even downright hostile to women and minority politics. In fact, when I had excitedly told one of my new senior colleagues that I was going to be participating in a women in politics mentoring event, they said, “just remember, it is important for you to attend events that are ‘straight political science.’”

While I am sure that they thought they were doing me a favor (they commented that scholars who study these topics are often marginalized), they were continuing to send me messages that my interests were not important or even “real political science.” I am so thankful for my time at the mentoring event. Being in the presence of such amazing established gender and politics scholars was unbelievably inspiring. Just as much, meeting other junior scholars helped me create long-lasting relationships and collaborations. Many of these attendees had been integral to the launching of *Politics & Gender* and many of the emerging scholars I met have made important contributions to the field and have mentored the next generation of scholars. This experience, and all these other subsequent ones, communicated to me that my research was indeed important and worthy of pursuit. Moreover, it brought me to a community that is professional, constructive, and kind.

The process of my first publication with *Politics & Gender* set the stage for women and executive office to be put on the map and become a specific research area. The experience demonstrated that you could receive critical feedback and a commitment to publish the best work in the field while being supportive. I was ecstatic when soon after “Women Rule” was published, the journal released a set of Critical Perspectives essays about the increased cases of women executives and the significance it had. Drawing from the globe, contributors examined recent cases of women executives emerging but placed them within a larger gender and politics framework. I still regularly consult these readings (Adams 2008; Holli, 2008; Tobar 2008; Wiliarty 2008) and assign them to my students.

Instead of feeling like my research was unimportant, I finally felt that it was part of an emerging area, one of a community of scholars pushing a new agenda forward. Tripp’s (2008) opening to the essays even referenced my work specifically as an example of how the recent increase in women executives “has opened up new possibilities for comparative scholarship.” A common thread among the

essays on women world leaders was that gender stereotypes sometimes work to women's advantage, though this again heavily depends upon the setting. Other findings included the insight that women are also sometimes presented with favorable political openings. Further, women's mobilization contributed to several presidential victories (Adams 2008; Holli 2008; Tobar 2008), possibly offsetting sexism. As such, women's emergence was multifaceted and complex. As the years have gone on, we have seen additional articles assessing what women leaders have meant for women as a group. For example, a recent special virtual issue of the journal commemorating the election of Mexico's first woman president was devoted to the wealth of works on women national leaders that have been published these last decades in *Politics & Gender*.

I am fortunate to have published in *Politics & Gender* multiple times, including co-authoring pieces related to women presidents and prime ministers. Many of my coauthors have been junior faculty members and from the Global South. I have taken the role of mentor very seriously over my academic career. *Politics & Gender* is more than a cutting-edge journal. It is a community that supports one another while pushing the boundaries of gender and politics research. I look forward to where the next twenty years leads for both women at the helm and for our community of scholars.

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