

## ARTICLE

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND GENDER INEQUALITY IN GUYANA:  
EXAMINING THE DISPARITIES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN IN  
POLITICAL LEADERSHIP.

FENEEZA ISHMAEL

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## **ABSTRACT**

Despite Guyana's legal frameworks promoting gender equality, women are considerably underrepresented in political leadership roles. This article explores gender disparity in political involvement in Guyana, with a particular emphasis on the differences between men and women in political leadership. It investigates the institutional and cultural constraints that limit women's access to political power, comparing Guyana's political representation to nations such as Rwanda, Sweden, and Finland who have effectively adopted gender parity in political leadership. The study examines case studies of Guyanese female politicians, presents updated statistical data on female political representation, and closes with policy proposals to increase women's engagement in political leadership in Guyana.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Political engagement in Guyana is still substantially biased towards male representation, with women disproportionately underrepresented in positions of political authority. Despite attempts to promote gender equality, women in Guyana do not even account for fifty percent of the political body, a difference that is exacerbated when contrasted to nations such as Rwanda, Sweden, and Finland, who have achieved gender parity in political leadership. While Guyana has produced trailblazers like Janet Jagan, the country's first female president, the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) Mrs. Shalimar Ali-Hack, and other notable female leaders, women remain underrepresented in critical leadership roles. This imbalance may be due to profoundly ingrained institutional and cultural impediments that limit women's access to political power, rather than a lack of drive or skill on their part. Traditional gender stereotypes, poor political backing for women, and a lack of resources all contribute to the persisting imbalance.

By evaluating these characteristics, the report emphasizes the necessity for comprehensive changes that address both the institutional and cultural barriers that women experience in achieving political leadership positions. Finally, the objective is to create a more fair political system that better reflects the interests and ambitions of all citizens, regardless of gender.

## **I. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN GUYANA**

Guyana's political and societal dynamics are deeply influenced by its colonial past, where British rule established gendered power structures that persist today.<sup>1</sup> These historical norms have shaped the complex relationship between women's economic roles and their status in society.

In the broader Caribbean, gender inequality in education is relatively low, with literacy rates comparable to Europe. There has been significant progress in female participation in professional careers. However, many women in Guyana still occupy low-paying, unstable jobs in the global economy. This inequality is rooted in the region's colonial legacy, where patriarchal norms—often inherited from colonial power structures—remain dominant. While Caribbean societies, including Guyana, have matrifocal or matrilineal family systems where women play central roles, these structures coexist with broader patriarchal ideologies that reinforce male dominance in the workforce and beyond.<sup>2</sup>

Despite advancements in women's rights, cultural traditions that prioritize male leadership and state patriarchy continue to hinder women's full participation in political and social spheres. This paradox is especially evident in the Caribbean, where women often have economic autonomy but remain subordinated by deep-seated gender norms and systemic inequalities.<sup>3</sup>

The legacies of colonialism still shape gender relations in Guyana, limiting the realization of true gender equality despite progress.

## **II. BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN GUYANA**

The barriers to women's political participation in Guyana are multifaceted, shaped by socioeconomic constraints, cultural expectations, and the gendered nature of political power. These challenges prevent women from entering and thriving in political leadership roles,

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<sup>1</sup>Maitreyi Das, 'Women's Autonomy and Politics of Gender in Guyana' (2000) JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4409361>.

<sup>2</sup>Eric O'Connor, 'The Patriarchy's Role in Gender Inequality in the Caribbean' (2014).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

underscoring the urgent need for continued efforts to promote gender equality in political leadership.

- Socio-cultural norms and gender roles

In Guyana, women are often placed in traditional caregiving roles, where family responsibilities take precedence over professional ambitions. This societal expectation discourages many women from pursuing leadership positions, as they may feel obligated to prioritize their families.

Additionally, deeply ingrained cultural biases perpetuate the stereotype that leadership, particularly in politics, is a "masculine" trait, further limiting women's opportunities in this field.

- Political and institutional barriers

The political landscape in Guyana is historically male-dominated, with political parties largely controlled by men and leadership roles typically reserved for them. Women often face significant challenges in accessing political networks, financial support, and other resources necessary to compete effectively. While there have been some notable female political figures, overall female representation in higher political offices remains low, reducing women's influence in critical decision-making processes.

- Gendered social expectations and family responsibilities

Gendered expectations also intersect with family responsibilities, creating additional obstacles for women. Women in Guyana are expected to take on caregiving roles for children and elderly relatives, leaving little time or energy for leadership positions that demand substantial time commitments. These dual pressures create a significant barrier for women wishing to pursue careers in public service or political leadership.

Together, these socio-cultural norms, political barriers, and gendered expectations form a complex web that hinders women's advancement in Guyana's political sphere. Addressing these challenges remains essential to achieving greater gender equality in political leadership.

### III. LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND GENDER INEQUALITY IN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN GUYANA

Guyana's Constitution guarantees gender equality, affirming women's right to equal participation in public life. The country is also a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which upholds women's rights to vote, hold public office, and engage in public functions. Specifically, Article 7 of CEDAW guarantees women's right to participate in political and public life.<sup>4</sup>

Despite these legal frameworks, significant gender disparities persist. No administration has ever seen women outnumber men in positions of power. Women's representation remains low across various political sectors, including local government, political parties, and public institutions.

#### - Constitutional Guarantees and Gender Inequality in Political Leadership

Article 29 of Guyana's Constitution states that "women's participation in management and decision-making processes, whether private, public, or state, shall be encouraged and facilitated by laws enacted for that purpose."<sup>5</sup> Article 149 further guarantees equality under the law for all citizens, ensuring women's right to equal treatment.<sup>6</sup> While these constitutional provisions are crucial steps towards gender equality, their practical implementation remains limited, particularly in political leadership.

#### - Comparative International Case Studies: Rwanda and Guyana

Countries like Rwanda have successfully implemented legal frameworks to ensure women's representation in politics. Rwanda's introduction of a 30% gender quota<sup>7</sup> led to women holding

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<sup>4</sup> Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), art 7.

<sup>5</sup> Constitution of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana (2012), CAP 1:01. Art 29.

<sup>6</sup> Constitution of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana (2012), CAP 1:01. Art 149.

<sup>7</sup> 'Rwanda's 30 Percent Gender Quota Led to the World's Largest Share of Women in Government' (*Pathfinders*, 21 June 2023)

<https://www.sdg16.plus/policies/rwandas-30-percent-gender-quota-led-to-the-worlds-largest-share-of-women-in-government/>.

over 60% of seats in parliament<sup>8</sup>—far surpassing the initial target. In contrast, while Guyana has made strides by achieving a 30% quota for women in political positions,<sup>9</sup> it still faces significant gender disparities, particularly in higher political offices. This comparison underscores the importance of enforceable gender quotas and reveals the challenges Guyana faces in translating its legal guarantees into tangible political change.

#### - The Absence of Enforceable Gender Quotas

The lack of enforceable gender quotas is a central factor in the underrepresentation of women in political leadership in Guyana. While policies exist, their voluntary nature means there is no legal obligation for political leaders or institutions to actively recruit or promote women. As a result, the political landscape remains dominated by men, particularly in top leadership roles.

Countries like Sweden, with gender-neutral policies and societal support for gender equality, have made significant progress in achieving gender parity in political leadership.<sup>10</sup> Guyana, however, has yet to adopt similarly enforceable policies, and the reliance on voluntary measures continues to skew leadership positions toward men. Enacting binding gender quotas could be a critical step in ensuring that women are more equitably represented in Guyana's political decision-making processes.

## **IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: COUNTRIES WITH GENDER PARITY IN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP**

A comparison between Guyana and countries that have successfully increased women's political participation offers valuable lessons on the impact of legislative quotas, cultural changes, and educational reforms in enhancing gender parity in leadership roles.

#### - Rwanda: A Global Leader in Gender Parity

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<sup>8</sup>'Monthly Ranking of Women in national parliaments' (*IPU Parline: Global Data on national parliaments*, 2023) <[https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/?amp&date\\_month=1&date\\_year=2023](https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/?amp&date_month=1&date_year=2023).

<sup>9</sup>'Only Two Caribbean Countries Meet 30% Gender Quota for Women Parliament in the Caribbean' (*United Nations*, 2023)

<<https://caribbean.un.org/en/252674-only-two-caribbean-countries-meet-30-gender-quota-women-parliament>.

<sup>10</sup>'Sweden and Gender Equality' (*sweden.se*, 20 November 2024) <<https://sweden.se/life/equality/gender-equality>.

Rwanda stands as a global leader in gender equality, with women holding 61% of parliamentary seats, the highest percentage in the world. This remarkable achievement is largely attributed to the country's gender quotas and post-genocide reforms aimed at empowering women to participate in decision-making processes. Rwanda's success highlights the power of legally mandated quotas and more importantly- strong political will to promote women's participation in governance.

As Claudette Mukamana, District Vice Mayor of Social Affairs, points out, women in political leadership often face skepticism regarding their capabilities. To overcome these challenges, Rwanda has invested in capacity-building for local women leaders and continues efforts to combat the stigma surrounding women in politics. This emphasis on empowerment and overcoming societal biases has been crucial in sustaining progress at the national level.<sup>11</sup>

#### - Sweden: Voluntary Gender Balance and Strong Social Policies

Unlike Rwanda, Sweden has achieved near gender parity in politics through voluntary gender-balanced nominations within political parties, rather than by legally enforced quotas. Sweden's success is driven by its cultural commitment to gender equality and strong social policies that support women in politics.<sup>12</sup> The country consistently ranks among the top five globally for gender equality across various sectors, including health, education, the economy, and politics.<sup>13</sup>

In 2021, Magdalena Andersson became Sweden's first female prime minister, and by 2022, women held 11 out of 23 ministerial positions. Additionally, women make up 46% of the Riksdag, Sweden's parliament. Sweden's commitment to gender-neutral parental leave (since 1974) and gender equality in the corporate sector, where 53% of CEOs in state-owned companies are women, reflects the country's dedication to breaking gender barriers both politically and

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<sup>11</sup> 'Revisiting Rwanda Five Years after Record-Breaking Parliamentary Elections' (*UN Women – Headquarters*, 2018) <<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/8/feature-rwanda-women-in-parliament>.

<sup>12</sup> 'Sweden and Gender Equality' (*sweden.se*, 20 November 2024) <<https://sweden.se/life/equality/gender-equality>.

<sup>13</sup> 'Global Gender Gap Report 2024' (*World Economic Forum*, 2024). <<https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/in-full/benchmarking-gender-gaps-2024-2e5f5cd886/>.

economically. Sweden's experience demonstrates that cultural support, gender-neutral policies, and voluntary quotas can promote gender parity without the need for strict legal mandates.<sup>14</sup>

- Finland: Legislative and Cultural Support for Women's Leadership

Finland's approach to gender equality integrates both legislative actions and cultural support. Through initiatives like the Academy of Finland's Equality and Non-Discrimination Plan, the country prioritizes gender equality, especially in research and academia. Finland's government has been an advocate for gender equality in international forums such as the EU, OECD, and UN, actively promoting gender mainstreaming and women's rights globally.<sup>15</sup>

Domestically, Finland has implemented supportive policies, such as gender-neutral parental leave and affordable childcare, which empower women to engage fully in public life. Finland's active role in global gender initiatives, including anti-trafficking efforts and reproductive health programs, further demonstrates its commitment to advancing women's rights both at home and abroad.<sup>16</sup>

While each country follows different paths to gender equality in political leadership, common themes emerge:

- Rwanda's success underscores the effectiveness of binding gender quotas combined with political will to dramatically increase women's participation in governance.
- Sweden shows that voluntary gender balance within political parties, supported by robust cultural norms and social policies, can effectively foster gender parity without legal mandates.
- Finland highlights the role of legislative measures and cultural policies, such as gender-neutral parental leave and affordable childcare, in creating an environment conducive to women's political leadership.

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<sup>14</sup>'Sweden and Gender Equality' (*sweden.se*, 20 November 2024) <<https://sweden.se/life/equality/gender-equality>.

<sup>15</sup>'Finland' (*European Institute for Gender Equality*, 6 April 2022) <[https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/legislative-policy-backgrounds/finland?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/legislative-policy-backgrounds/finland?language_content_entity=en).

<sup>16</sup>'Finland' (2004) <<https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/Review/responses/FINLAND-English.pdf>.

These countries demonstrate that while quotas can increase the numerical representation of women, true gender parity requires addressing deeper social and cultural barriers that may otherwise limit women's full participation in political and public life. For Guyana, integrating similar strategies—whether through binding quotas, gender-neutral policies, or cultural shifts—could help achieve greater gender parity in political leadership and ensure women's voices are genuinely represented in decision-making processes.

## **VI. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND SOLUTIONS**

To address gender inequality in Guyana's political sphere, several policy reforms are recommended:

1. **Enhance Quota Systems:** Assess and strengthen existing quota systems to ensure not just participation but also meaningful representation in leadership positions. To achieve this, Work can be done with political parties to establish and enforce clear criteria for candidacy and appointment that prioritize women's representation.
2. **Political Mentorship Programs** – Establish advance programs that provide mentorship, training, and resources for aspiring female politicians to help them navigate the challenges of running for office and securing leadership roles.
3. **Public Awareness Campaigns** – Launch nationwide campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes and promote the value of women in political leadership, thereby creating a cultural shift that supports women's political participation. Highlight successful female leaders to inspire and motivate women to pursue leadership roles. Utilize social media, radio, newspaper, and community events to disseminate messages that advocate for gender equality in leadership.

## **CONCLUSION**

Gender inequality in political leadership remains a pervasive issue in Guyana, despite constitutional guarantees and international commitments to gender equality. While legal

frameworks such as the Constitution of Guyana and CEDAW outline the rights of women to participate in political life, the practical application of these provisions has been hindered by entrenched socio-cultural norms, political structures, and institutional barriers. The persistence of these inequalities is a direct consequence of the country's colonial legacy, where gendered power dynamics were institutionalized, and patriarchal systems continue to dominate both family and political spheres.

The underrepresentation of women in Guyana's political leadership is not solely due to the absence of legal frameworks, but rather the lack of enforceable mechanisms that can compel gender parity in political participation. Unlike countries such as Rwanda, Sweden, and Finland, where legal quotas, supportive policies, and cultural reforms have successfully advanced gender equality, Guyana's reliance on voluntary measures has resulted in limited progress. The experiences of these countries offer valuable lessons: Rwanda's binding gender quotas, Sweden's voluntary gender balance supported by cultural policies, and Finland's combination of legislative actions and family-friendly policies all demonstrate the need for a multi-faceted approach to achieve gender parity in political leadership.

For Guyana, the path to achieving gender equality in political leadership will require more than just constitutional guarantees. The country must consider enforceable gender quotas, similar to those in Rwanda, to address the systemic underrepresentation of women in political positions. Additionally, adopting policies like gender-neutral parental leave, affordable childcare, and other family-supportive measures—as seen in Sweden and Finland—could alleviate the societal pressures that disproportionately burden women and limit their ability to engage fully in political life.

Ultimately, the realization of full gender equality in Guyana's political leadership will depend on the political will to enforce legal frameworks, cultural shifts that challenge patriarchal norms, and institutional reforms that create an environment where women can thrive as leaders. Drawing from the experiences of successful models like Rwanda, Sweden, and Finland, Guyana has the potential to make meaningful strides toward gender parity, ensuring that women's voices are not only heard but also respected and represented in governance and decision-making.

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