

# Women in National Governments Around the Globe: Fact Sheet

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Updated December 4, 2019

**Congressional Research Service**

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R45483

## Introduction

Women and girls make up half of the world's population; however, in most countries, women are underrepresented in the political process at the national level. As this report shows, women currently hold 24.5% of legislative seats around the world, an increase from 13.0% of legislative seats in 1999 (see **Figure 1**). As of October 1, 2019, women held 50% or more of the legislative seats in four countries: Rwanda, Cuba, Bolivia, and Andorra (see **Table 3**). At the executive level, at least 25 countries currently have an elected female head of state or government (see **Table 5**). Since 1960, about 110 women have been elected or appointed as head of the national government in approximately 70 countries.<sup>1</sup>

The participation and representation of women in elected government is generally considered healthy for their communities. As Heather Nauert, then-Acting Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, and State Department Spokesperson, stated in March 2018, “the low status of women and girls has vast political, economic, and social implications. It can limit the ability of communities to resolve conflict, countries to boost their economies, or regions to grow enough food.”<sup>2</sup>

In supporting efforts to empower women, the 116<sup>th</sup> U.S. Congress has introduced legislation (H.R. 3352 and S. 2583) to authorize and appropriate funds for programs operated by the U.S. Department of State and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), such as the Office of Global Women's Issues and the Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative.<sup>3</sup> On June 19, 2019, the House passed H.R. 2740, which includes appropriations of at least \$50 million for programs designed to strengthen protections for women's political status, and to expand women's participation in political parties and elections.<sup>4</sup> The 115<sup>th</sup> Congress enacted the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017 (P.L. 115-68) with the aim to increase the participation of women in conflict prevention and conflict resolution processes as a means to build more inclusive societies and to help stabilize countries and regions. This act expressed the sense of Congress that “the political participation, and leadership of women in fragile environments, particularly during democratic transitions, is critical to sustaining lasting democratic institutions.”<sup>5</sup>

This report provides a global snapshot of women's political participation worldwide by compiling statistics and other information from a variety of sources, including *The Global Gender Gap Report 2018* issued by the World Economic Forum, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, the *CIA World Factbook*, news reports, and other sources.

## Voting Rights

The right to vote is a primary step toward involving a populace in the political decisions of a government. In many countries, voting rights were originally granted only to adult men who

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<sup>1</sup> *The Global Gender Gap Report 2018*, prepared by The World Economic Forum, December 18, 2018, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2018>.

<sup>2</sup> Heather Nauert, remarks at the 2018 Annual International Women of Courage Awards Ceremony, Washington, DC, March 23, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/03/279541.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> H.R. 3352, the Department of State Authorization Act of 2019, and S. 2583, the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> H.R. 2740, the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, Defense, State, Foreign Operations, and Energy and Water Development Appropriations Act, 2020. See §7059(b), Women's Leadership.

<sup>5</sup> P.L. 115-68 §3(2).

owned property, then were eventually expanded to include all adult male citizens regardless of property ownership, then women, and then other underrepresented groups. Definitions of what constituted a “citizen” may also have changed over time, as they did in the United States, and gradually have become more inclusive of minorities and indigenous peoples. Other countries enacted universal suffrage from their very founding, granting the right to vote to all adults, male and female, regardless of ethnicity, religion, economic standing, or other criterion.

**Table 1** and **Table 2**, respectively, list the first and latest countries to extend the right and duty of voting to women. Although subnational regions (e.g., states, provinces) may have granted the right to vote earlier, the years in the tables below indicate when suffrage was extended for national elections to female adult citizens.

**Table 1. First Countries to Allow Women to Vote**

Year	Country(ies)	Year	Country(ies)
1893	New Zealand	1917	Canada*
1902	Australia*	1918	Austria, Estonia, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland,* Kyrgyz Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, United Kingdom*
1906	Finland	1919	Belarus, Belgium,* Luxembourg, Netherlands, Sweden,* Ukraine
1913	Norway	1920	Albania, Czech Republic, Iceland,** Slovak Republic, United States
1915	Denmark, Iceland*	1921	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Sweden**

**Source:** The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/suffrage.htm>.

**Notes:** Some countries granted suffrage in stages, at first denying the right to women of certain racial, ethnic, or economic groups. One asterisk (\*) indicates the first year female citizens were allowed to vote in national elections with limitations; two asterisks (\*\*) indicate when those limitations were removed. No asterisk indicates there were no restrictions and all female adult citizens were granted the right to vote.

**Table 2. Most Recent Countries to Allow Women to Vote**

Year	Country
2003	Qatar
2005	Kuwait
2006	United Arab Emirates
2011	Saudi Arabia

**Sources:** Pamela Paxton and Melanie M. Hughes, *Women, Politics, and Power: A Global Perspective*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, SAGE Publications, 2014, p. 50-51; and the *CIA World Factbook on Suffrage*, at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/fields/311.html#AF>; “‘Surprise and Excitement’: Saudi Women React to Voting Rights Decision,” NPR, September 26, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2011/09/26/140819859/surprise-and-excitement-saudi-women-react-to-voting-rights-decision>.

**Note:** Newly independent countries (Kosovo, South Sudan, etc.) would be included only if women had not been granted suffrage under the preceding country. For example, because Sudan granted women the right to vote in 1964, South Sudan is not included in this list, even though it did not gain independence until 2011.

## Legislative Representation

Women's suffrage has been closely linked to women's participation in legislative bodies. In 1907, the voters of Finland elected 19 women to the country's new unicameral parliament a year after Finnish women were granted suffrage; this was the first election in the world in which the names of both female and male candidates appeared on the ballot. On the other end of the spectrum, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia granted Saudi women the right to vote and run in municipal elections in 2011; women were able to exercise this right for the first time in 2015.<sup>6</sup>

## Gender Quotas

Several countries have instituted quotas to ensure that women are represented on the ballot or in the legislature. Similar quotas may also be used to ensure ethnic or religious diversity in the national legislature of some countries (e.g., Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq).

The *Atlas of Electoral Gender Quotas* explains that “[g]ender quotas are numerical targets that stipulate the number or percentage of women that must be included in a candidate list or the number of seats to be allocated to women in a legislature. They aim to reverse discrimination in law and practice and to level the playing field for women and men in politics.” The *Atlas* further states that “gender quotas have proved to be the single most effective tool for ‘fast-tracking’ women’s representation in elected bodies of government.”<sup>7</sup>

Three main types of gender quotas are generally recognized, and they may be used at the national or subnational level, or both:

- **Legislated candidate quotas.** These quotas are mandated through national constitutions or legislation to regulate the gender composition of the ballot.
- **Legislated “reserved seats.”** These quotas reserve a specific number or percentage of seats in the legislature for women members. The quotas are mandated through national constitutions or legislation and are implemented through special electoral procedures.
- **Party quotas (also known as voluntary party quotas).** These quotas are adopted by individual political parties through the party’s statutes and rules. Such adoption is the prerogative of each party, and some parties in a country may adopt quotas while other parties choose not to do so.

**Table 3** shows the number of seats held by women in the national legislative chambers of selected countries. The countries listed include the 19 nation members of the G-20 (excluding the European Union) and 11 countries that have legislative bodies in which women hold 44% or more of the seats. Two members of the G-20—South Africa and Mexico—are included in the 11 countries with more than 44% women legislators.

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<sup>6</sup> “‘Surprise and Excitement’: Saudi Women React to Voting Rights Decision,” NPR, September 26, 2011, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2011/09/26/140819859/surprise-and-excitement-saudi-women-react-to-voting-rights-decision>; “For Saudi Women, ‘Baby Steps into this World of Democracy,’” NPR, December 2, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/12/02/458162191/for-saudi-women-baby-steps-into-this-world-of-democracy>.

<sup>7</sup> The *Atlas of Electoral Gender Quotas* was a joint project of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and Stockholm University, published in June 2014, p. 16, available at <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/atlas-electoral-gender-quotas?lang=en>.

**Table 3. Female Representation in National Legislatures of Selected Countries**

As of October 1, 2019

IPU Rank by % of Total Seats Held by Women <sup>a</sup>	Country	Type of Legislative System	National Level Gender Quota Codes <sup>b</sup>	Total Legislative Seats	Total Seats Held by Women	% of Total Seats Held by Women
1	Rwanda	Bicameral	RS	106	59	55.7
2	Cuba	Unicameral	None	605	322	53.2
3	Bolivia	Bicameral	C, P	166	86	51.8
4	Andorra	Unicameral	None	28	14	50.0
5	Mexico	Bicameral	C,P	628	304	48.4
6	Sweden	Unicameral	P	349	165	47.3
7	Finland	Unicameral	None	200	94	47.0
8	Costa Rica	Unicameral	C, P	57	26	45.6
9	South Africa	Bicameral	P	449	201	44.8
10	Nicaragua	Unicameral	C, P	92	41	44.6
11	Spain	Bicameral	C, P	611	269	44.0
18	Argentina	Bicameral	C, P	329	130	39.5
30	France	Bicameral	C, P	925	341	36.9
31	Australia	Bicameral	P	227	83	36.6
34	Italy	Bicameral	P	950	335	35.3
43	Canada	Bicameral	P	439	139	31.7
44	Germany	Bicameral	P	778	246	31.6
56	United Kingdom	Bicameral	P	1,439	416	28.9
71	China	Unicameral	RS	2,975	742	24.9
76	United States	Unicameral	None	534	127	23.8
109	Saudi Arabia	Unicameral	RS	151	30	19.9
124	Turkey	Unicameral	P	596	104	17.4
125	Indonesia	Unicameral	C	575	100	17.4
131	South Korea	Unicameral	C, P	300	50	16.7
133	Russia	Bicameral	None	620	102	16.5
139	Brazil	Bicameral	C, P	594	89	15.0
144	Japan	Bicameral	None	710	103	14.5
149	India	Bicameral	Sub only	786	106	13.5
<b>TOTAL 192 COUNTRIES</b>				<b>46,218</b>	<b>11,340</b>	<b>24.5%</b>

**Source:** Compiled by the Congressional Research Service using data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union at <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=7&year=2019>, and the Gender Quotas Database at <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/database>, published by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, as posted on November 12, 2019.

**Notes:** The selected countries listed here include the 19 national members of the G-20 (excluding the European Union) and the 11 countries in which women hold 44% or more of the seats in the national legislative body.

- a. The rankings by percentage of total seats held by women is based on the 192 countries listed in the complete IPU list of Percentage of Women in National Parliaments, posted at <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=7&year=2019>.
- b. Four codes indicate the type of gender quota used in the country: C=legislated quotas for candidates on the ballot level; RS=legislated quotas for reserved seats; P=voluntary party quotas; Sub only=quotas at the subnational level only, as identified by the Gender Quotas Database.

Table 4 lists countries where women hold fewer than 8% of the legislative seats.

**Table 4. Countries Where Women Hold Fewer Than 8% of Total Legislative Seats**

As of October 1, 2019

IPU Rank by % of Total Seats Held by Women <sup>a</sup>	Country	Type of Legislative System	National Level Gender Quota Codes <sup>b</sup>	Total Legislative Seats	Total Seats Held by Women	% of Total Seats Held by Women
176	Tonga	Unicameral	No data	27	2	7.4
177	Benin	Unicameral	No data	83	6	7.2
178	Kiribati	Unicameral	No data	46	3	6.5
179	Tuvalu	Unicameral	No data	16	1	6.3
180	Comoros	Unicameral	No data	33	2	6.1
181	Iran	Unicameral	No data	289	17	5.9
182	Sri Lanka	Unicameral	Sub only	225	12	5.3
183	Lebanon	Unicameral	None	128	6	4.7
184	Kuwait	Unicameral	No data	65	3	4.6
185	Maldives	Unicameral	No data	87	4	4.6
186	Nigeria	Bicameral	No data	462	19	4.1
187	Solomon Islands	Unicameral	C	49	2	4.1
188	Haiti	Bicameral	RS	146	4	2.7
189	Yemen	Bicameral	No data	412	4	1.0
190	Micronesia	Unicameral	No data	14	0	0.0
191	Papua New Guinea	Unicameral	No data	111	0	0.0
192	Vanuatu	Unicameral	Sub only	52	0	0.0

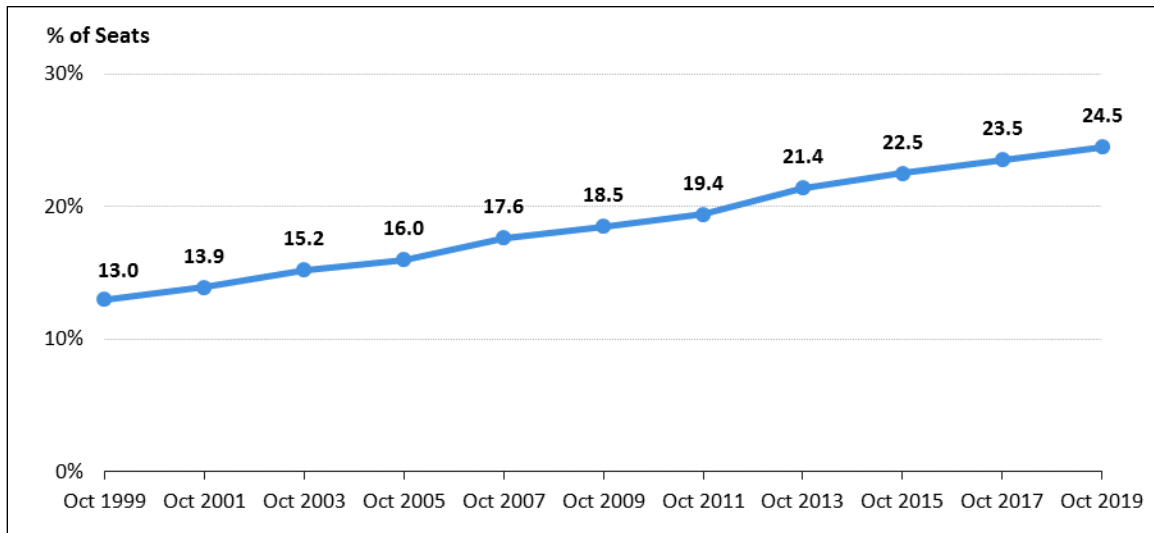
**Source:** Compiled by the Congressional Research Service using data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union at <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=7&year=2019>, and the Gender Quotas Database at <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/database>, published by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, as posted on November 12, 2019.

- a. The rankings by percentage of total seats held by women is based on the 192 countries listed in the complete IPU list of Percentage of Women in National Parliaments, posted at <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=7&year=2019>.
- b. Four codes indicate the type of gender quota used in the country: C=legislated quotas for candidates on the ballot level; RS=legislated quotas for reserved seats; P=voluntary party quotas; Sub only=quotas at the subnational level only, as identified by the Gender Quotas Database.

Over a 20-year period, the percentage of seats held by women in national legislatures has risen worldwide from 13.0% in October 1999 to 24.5% by October 2019 (see **Figure 1**).

**Figure 1. Worldwide Percentage of Seats Held by Women in National Legislatures**

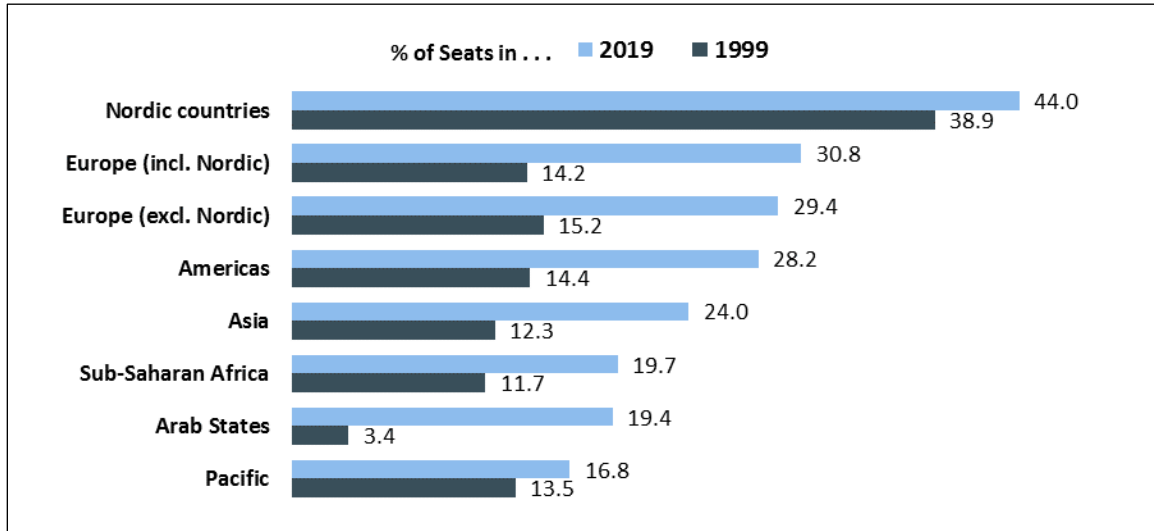
1999-2019



**Source:** Created by CRS using data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, available at <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/world-arc.htm>.

As shown in **Figure 2**, in 1999, women held more than 20% of legislative seats in only one region, the Nordic countries. In 2019, women legislators in four more regions held more than 20% of the legislative seats, and only slightly less than 20% in two additional regions. The Pacific region made the smallest gain, 3.3%, and is now the region with the smallest portion of legislative seats held by women.

**Figure 2. Regional Percentages of Seats Held by Women in National Legislatures**  
1999-2019



**Source:** Created by CRS using data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, available at <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/world-arc.htm>.

## Executive Representation

At least 70 countries have chosen a woman as their executive since Sirima Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka was selected as the world's first female Prime Minister in 1960. Executives may be selected through various methods: directly elected from a ballot dedicated to the executive office; indirectly elected by the legislature; appointed, following legislative elections, as the leader of the majority political party or majority coalition; or through other indirect means.

## Women Leaders in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

**Table 5. Current Women Executives**

Country	Name	Title	Dates in Office
Denmark	Mette <b>Frederiksen</b>	Prime Minister	June 26, 2019–present
Slovakia	Zuzana <b>Čaputová</b> <sup>a</sup>	President	June 15, 2019–present
Georgia	Salome <b>Zourabichvili</b>	President	Dec. 16, 2018–present
Ethiopia	<b>Sahle-Work</b> Zewde <sup>a</sup>	President	Oct. 25, 2018–present
Barbados	Mia <b>Mottley</b>	Prime Minister	May 25, 2018–present
Trinidad and Tobago	Paula-Mae <b>Weekes</b> <sup>a</sup>	President	Mar. 19, 2018–present
Romania	Viorica <b>Dancila</b> <sup>a</sup>	Prime Minister	Jan. 29, 2018–present
Iceland	Katrin <b>Jakobsdottir</b>	Prime Minister	Nov. 30, 2017–present
Aruba	Evelyn <b>Wever-Croes</b> <sup>a</sup>	Prime Minister	Nov. 17, 2017–present
New Zealand	Jacinda <b>Ardern</b>	Prime Minister	Oct. 26, 2017–present
Singapore	Halimah <b>Yacob</b> <sup>a</sup>	President	Sept. 14, 2017–present



Country	Name	Title	Dates in Office
Hong Kong <sup>b</sup>	Carrie <b>Lam</b> <sup>a</sup>	Chief Executive	July 1, 2017–present
Serbia	Ana <b>Brnabic</b>	Prime Minister	June 29, 2017–present
Turks and Caicos Islands	Sharlene <b>Cartwright-Robinson</b> <sup>a</sup>	Premier	Dec. 20, 2016–present
Estonia	Kersti <b>Kaljulad</b> <sup>a</sup>	President	Oct. 10, 2016–present
Taiwan	<b>Tsai</b> Ing-wen <sup>a</sup>	President	May 20, 2016–present
Burma <sup>c</sup>	<b>Aung San Suu Kyi</b> <sup>a</sup>	State Counsellor	Apr. 6, 2016–present
Marshall Islands	Hilda C. <b>Heine</b> <sup>a</sup>	President	Jan. 28, 2016–present
Nepal	Bidhya Devi <b>Bandhar</b> <sup>a</sup>	President	Oct. 29, 2015–present
Namibia	Saara <b>Kuugongelwa-Amadhila</b> <sup>a</sup>	Prime Minister	March 21, 2015–present
Croatia	Kolinda <b>Grabar-Kitarovic</b>	President	Feb. 19, 2015–present
Malta	Marie-Louise Coleiro <b>Preca</b>	President	Apr. 4, 2014–present
Norway	Erna <b>Solberg</b>	Prime Minister	Oct. 16, 2013–present
Bangladesh	Sheikh <b>Hasina</b>	Prime Minister	1996–2001; Jan. 6, 2009–present
Germany	Angela <b>Merkel</b> <sup>a</sup>	Chancellor	Nov. 22, 2005–present

**Source:** Compiled by the Congressional Research Service using information from the *CIA World Factbook*, available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/fields/312.html#AG>, and the Global Gender Gap 2018, published by the World Economic Forum, at <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2018>, and news sources.

**Notes:** Surnames appear in bold face.

- This woman is the first female to hold this position in her country.
- Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, but it enjoys a high degree of autonomy. Although President Xi Jinping is China's chief of state, Chief Executive Carrie Lam is recognized as the head of Hong Kong's government and, as such, is responsible for the day-to-day governance of Hong Kong.
- Provisions in Burma's 2008 constitution prohibit Aung San Suu Kyi from holding the position of President. As the leader of the National League for Democracy, the majority party in the national legislature following the 2015 parliamentary elections, she was selected by the parliament for the new position of State Counsellor, created in April 2016. She is recognized as the de facto leader of the civilian side of Burma's government, which includes a robust military component. She concurrently serves as the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister for the Office of the President. Burma's current President is Win Myint, a close friend of Aung San Suu Kyi.

**Table 6** lists additional women who served as the executive of their country, and whose term of office has concluded.

**Table 6. Additional Female Executives from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Selected leaders whose term of office has ended prior to October 1, 2019.

Country	Name	Title	Years in Office
Bangladesh	Khaleda <b>Zia</b>	Prime Minister	1991-1996 and 2001-2006
Panama	Mireya <b>Moscoso</b>	President	1999-2004

Country	Name	Title	Years in Office
New Zealand	Helen <b>Clark</b>	Prime Minister	1999-2008
After leaving office, Clark became the Administrator of the United Nations Development Program.			
Indonesia	<b>Megawati</b> Sukarnoputri	President	2001-2004
Philippines	Gloria Macapagal <b>Arroyo</b>	President	2001-2010
Jamaica	Portia <b>Simpson-Miller</b>	Prime Minister	2006-2007 and 2012-2016
Chile	Michelle <b>Bachelet</b>	President	2006-2010 and 2014-2018
Liberia	Ellen Johnson <b>Sirleaf</b>	President	2006-2018
Sirleaf was the first woman to be elected the head of state of an African country.			
Argentina	Cristina Fernandez <b>De Kirchner</b>	President	2007-2015
India	Pratibha <b>Patil</b>	President	2007-2012
Thailand	Yingluck <b>Shinawatra</b>	Prime Minister	2011-2014
Shinawatra was forced to leave office after the constitutional court found her guilty of abusing her power.			
Brazil	Dilma <b>Rousseff</b>	President	2011-2016
Rousseff was the first woman elected as President of Brazil and was reelected in 2014. Over allegations of corruption, she was impeached and removed from office in August 2016.			
Malawi	Joyce <b>Banda</b>	President	2012-2014
Banda was elected in 2009 as Vice President to President Bingu wa Mutharika. She succeeded him as President upon his death in April 2012.			
South Korea	<b>Park</b> Geun-hye	President	2013-2017
Park was the first female President of South Korea. She became the country's first democratically elected president to be impeached on grounds of corruption and removed from office.			
United Kingdom	Theresa <b>May</b>	Prime Minister	2016-2019
Lithuania	Dalia <b>Grybauskaite</b>	President	2009-2019

**Source:** Compiled by the Congressional Research Service using news reports, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and the BBC.

**Notes:** Surnames appear in bold face.

## Women Leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Table 7 identifies several notable female executives who held office in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Table 7. Notable Women Executives, from 1960 to 2000**

Country	Name	Title	Years in Office
Sri Lanka	Sirimavo <b>Bandaranaike</b>	Prime Minister	1960-1965; 1970-1977; 1994-2000
Bandaranaike was the world's first female Prime Minister			
India	Indira <b>Gandhi</b>	Prime Minister	1966-1977 and 1980-1984
Gandhi was assassinated while in office; she was succeeded by her son, Rajiv.			
Israel	Golda <b>Meir</b>	Prime Minister	1969-1974

Meir and her husband immigrated to then Palestine in 1921. She was a founder of the State of Israel and the fourth prime minister.

Argentina	Isabel Martinez de <b>Perón</b>	President	1974-1976
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Peron was world's first female president.

United Kingdom	Margaret <b>Thatcher</b>	Prime Minister	1979-1990
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Thatcher became the first woman prime minister in Europe and was the only British prime minister in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to be elected to three consecutive terms.

Philippines	Corazon <b>Aquino</b>	President	1986-1992
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Pakistan	Benazir <b>Bhutto</b>	Prime Minister	1988-1990 and 1993-1996
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In January 1990, Bhutto became the first prime minister to give birth while in office.

**Source:** Compiled by the Congressional Research Service using news and other sources, such as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and *Gale Biography in Context*.

**Notes:** Surnames appear in bold face.

## Acknowledgements

Sandra Delaney, CRS summer intern, and Jennifer Roscoe, CRS research assistant, helped in gathering data and presenting key points.

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