

# Who gets heard?

The struggle for women's authority in public life

Across the world the under-representation of women in public life is striking, writes **Purna Sen**.

Only 27 out of 1,941 national leaders during the 20th century were women. That is just 1.4 per cent. However, among that 27 were some extraordinary women.

More recently, President Joyce Banda of Malawi unexpectedly came to lead her country against powerful opposition and was listed by Forbes last year as the most powerful woman in Africa.

She bucks the trend though, even among the small percentage of female national leaders. Her father is listed as a popular police brass band musician, whereas, more generally, dynastic leadership has provided the backdrop for women to take positions of power in Asia, with Gandhi in India, Bhutto in Pakistan and Shinawatra in Thailand. In these cases women have followed fathers, husbands and brothers into national leadership.

At LSE's Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) we are developing a research and engagement strand on women in public life that will go beyond the numbers, for we know many good people are monitoring these. At the IPA we are interested in linking scholarship to impacts in public affairs. We need to understand how and when women have been successful – these accounts are little heard – as well as what impacts are felt when women are an integral part of public life.

There is much to be explored beyond political life – the public stage is an expansive space. For example, Oprah Winfrey has been consistently named one of the most influential women in the world without holding any formal office.

In the UK women activists have profoundly impacted what happens in our shared lives. They include Caroline Criado-Perez, an LSE student who responded to the preponderance of male experts in the UK media, including on women's life experiences, by establishing a register of women ready to talk about their specialisms.

It's no great surprise perhaps that women will campaign for women's rights and recognition but women have also led in other fields. The late Wangari Mathai, for example, led Kenya and the world through her work on environmental degradation and the Green Belt Movement.

New forms of organising in public life, with the greater role of the internet and social media, may be opening up spaces in which authority is wrested away from the traditional, powerful, male figure. There are indications that women are increasingly involved in online campaigning, and therefore potentially in having impact, compared to previous dominant forms of political and social activism; and more involved than men.

The IPA will capture the experiences of women who have shaped public life and share their reflections with others who seek a more balanced public sphere. We will ask – how did women make it? What impacts have they had? How will the lessons learned benefit women who follow and men looking for a richer public life? What if anything is changing in the way women occupy the public sphere? And, of course, who gets to be heard?

We are interested in the norms of public life that vest authority and credibility in the male actor, in the many hurdles across much of the world that deny women – no matter what their expertise, experience or qualifications – the possibility of credibility and authority.

The IPA will draw on the experiences and reflections of people such as President Banda, Prime Minister Gillard, Shirin Ebadi and Caroline Criado-Perez to learn lessons from pioneers and to support men and women who will invest in creating richer ways of making policy, of influencing public life and of creating a different public space. And we will watch ourselves – how does LSE fare in the task of enabling women's expertise to flourish for the benefit of the academy? A strand of this is representation but it is also intimately linked to cultural and political meanings given to male and female presence and voice.

We will have women visit us and provide them with a home to think and reflect; and we will hold public events – the first planned for summer 2014 – where those who seek changes in public life, policymaking and public activism have time to think, exchange knowledge and plan together. ■



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