

Drude Dahlerup: *Has Democracy Failed Women?* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018.

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1 In recent years, researches have been conducted from different perspectives—such as cultural differences, economic influences, and institutional policies—to investigate the existing obstacles limiting women’s participation and leadership in political institutions and organizations worldwide (Thames and Williams 3). There are numerous research literature tackling the topic on the representation of women in politics: for instance, *Women, Politics, and Power: A Global Perspective* by Pamela Paxton and Melanie M. Hughes has a broad discussion on all factors relating to the political representation of women and presents regional studies on women in political institutions around the globe; *Contagious Representation: Women’s Political Representation in Democracies around the World* by Frank C. Thames and Margaret S. Williams explains the contagious influences of women’s political participation on both institutional and societal levels; and Torild Skard’s *Women of Power: Half a Century of Female Presidents and Prime Ministers Worldwide* gives regional analyses and case studies of women’s political leadership in national institutions. Contributing to the research on women and institutional policies, Drude Dahlerup’s *Has Democracy Failed Women* focuses on political institution *per se* with a global perspective and critically engages with the disconnection between women and political institutions both on national and international levels. In particular, Dahlerup investigates how the traditions and policies in political institutions and organizations have resulted in women’s underrepresentation in the political field, why it is of great significance to promote gender equality by adopting gender quotas and women-friendly policies, and what difference can be made in policy-making if national and international political institutions and organizations become more gender-balanced. Moreover, apart from the analysis on political governance, the scope of this book extends further to address women’s representation and perspectives with regard to economic governance and peace-building in transnational or international organizations (121-34).

2 Dividing her book into five chapters, each of which concentrates on a particular issue and leads to the next topic progressively, Dahlerup argues that current political institutions and organizations have continued to form a male-centric hierarchy and have become the major obstacles which prevent women from entering political professions and reaching for leadership positions. In Chapter 1 “Exclusion Without Words,” Dahlerup points out that democracy has

failed women from the beginning and has constituted male-dominance in political structures from various dimensions. Based on “a historical neo-institutionalist perspective,” Dahlerup considers “the ‘stickiness’ of institutions,” or the inertial influence of the pre-existing gender-biased traditions before women’s participation in political institutions, to be a main factor responsible for unbalanced gender power relations and women’s under-representation in democratic regimes (3-4). The early exclusion of women from the political field during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has made it a common phenomenon for the democracies to divide social and political roles based on gender difference, limiting women’s roles in the private sphere. The new ideas and arguments emerged in the feminist movements have promoted the transformation of women’s roles into real citizens, have improved the unequal gender relations in society, and have also made up the incomprehensive transitional process to democracy (22-23).

3 In Chapter 2 “Breaking Male Dominance in Politics,” Dahlerup proceeds to discuss the process and reality of women’s inclusion and participation in politics, and points out that the realization of global suffrage cannot fully guarantee that “democracy [can stop] failing women” (27). Due to the “inertia of the old democracies” (37), namely “the ‘stickiness’ of the political institutions” in continuing the male-centric traditions in the political world, women are often considered as intruders and face obstacles from the institutional level (30). Hence, Dahlerup questions the validity of the gendered claim which doubts the professional capability of women to work in the political field, and argues that the electoral systems and political parties are gender-biased and unsupportive of female candidates. Concerning the future of gender equality, Dahlerup adopts “the time-lag theory” and “the modernization theory” (56) to demonstrate that it will take some time for value-changing and culture-transforming in order to end the male dominance and women’s underrepresentation in political institutions (30). Meanwhile, factoring in the possible obstacles, “the theory of continuous reproduction of patriarchal structures” shows that the stagnation and fluctuation of women’s representation might appear and bring some unexpected changes challenging the realization of gender parity; and “the theory of shrinking institutions” depicts the worries and debates regarding the relationship between the power of political institutions and the influence of women’s representation (56-58).

4 To further tackle the problem of women’s underrepresentation in politics, Chapter 3 “The Impact of Gender Quotas” introduces the definition, discourses, and debates regarding the three quotas waves and the implementation of gender quotas in all types of political institutions and organizations. Dahlerup stresses that people may have their own understandings of gender quotas, while few of them know how they function (61-63). Dahlerup sees gender quotas as

“an affirmative action measure” and “a fast track policy” to guarantee equality (63). Currently, there are two different categories of top-ranking democracies with women’s high representation in electoral offices—the majority of these countries are from the Global South, while the others are from the well-developed Northern European countries (61). Particularly, Dahlerup discusses whether gender-based quotas interfere with the basic principles and progress of democracy (71). After an analysis of the status quo of gender quotas worldwide, Dahlerup concludes that, even though that gender quotas “cannot solve all the problems women encounter in politics,” they still play significant roles in raising women’s representation in the political field and contributing to “democratization in terms of who is included in political decision-making in all types of societies” (89-90).

5 Chapter 4, “Gendering Public Policy”, mainly deals with policy-making in the situation when women’s representation in politics is generally increased, and then explores the influence of female leaders on the political policies of women’s welfare, women’s rights, and gender equality (93). Nowadays, policies on gender equality have been institutionalized with government branches globally to enhance “gender relations and gendered structures”; and as a result of the lack of “male equivalent” and the overlook of measuring levels, the concept of gender equality has been argued and discussed for further improvement (100-01). Based on “the critical mass theory,” only when the number of women reach a considerable higher percentage in political institutions and organizations, can they really be influential in the process of political policy-making and be able to promote and ensure gender equality. Nevertheless, female leaders often face more constraints as the leadership positions have been “masculine-coded” (107), and they are challenged by many invisible barriers—“glass ceiling and glass cliff”—on their way to the top leadership positions (108). Therefore, women leaders often consider gender parity as one of their political commitment and actively promote gender equality policies. Lately, terms such as “state feminism” and “gender mainstreaming” have emerged in some nations, widely planting the idea of gender equality in the political discourse on the one hand, and imposing possible danger that “the transformative force of the demands of the women’s movements disappears” on the other (114). After all, no matter whether as individuals or as groups, women need “well-functioning and open democracies” to perform state interventions to end discrimination and inequality in the workplace and in society at large (114-16). Besides, as a consequence of the newly emerged global politics and governance structures, the democracies’ power is weakened, and women’s status in global politics becomes an essential issue to concentrate upon (116-17).

6 The final chapter “Women in Global Politics” continues with the question raised in the previous chapter and forms a gendered perspective to investigate women’s roles in the global arena, especially women’s representation and inclusion in transnational and international political institutions and organizations. Admitting that the global political field is much more gender-imbalanced, Dahlerup devotes most of this chapter to three cases. Firstly, in global economic organizations, such as the IMF, the WTO, and the World Bank, the male dominance still prevails and women are largely underrepresented. This aspect also connects with current debates on “the utility argument” concerning women’s representation and inclusion in economic sectors and organizations (122-23). Secondly, as women’s presence and inclusion in global organizations have increased recently, women “have made substantial contributions to peacemaking and constitution-building” despite the indifferent attitude of “many negotiating parties and mediators” (131-32). Thirdly, transnational women’s organizations can strongly influence not only “global and regional governance organizations and institutions,” but also “national and local initiatives” (135). Specifically, the UN plays the most vital role in women’s political participation globally by “developing new global gender discourses” (138). In her conclusion, Dahlerup emphasizes that it is of great importance to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and prevent “the revitalization of democracies,” and states that gender parity remains as a long-term task which asks for relentless efforts from women all around the world to accomplish in the future (147-48).

7 Drude Dahlerup’s *Has Democracy Failed Women* presents an insightful and logical analysis regarding the reasons of women’s underrepresentation in political institutions and organizations by supporting her discussion with a variety of theoretical references, historical facts, and latest data of women’s status in politics. Dahlerup successfully introduces a wide scope of knowledge on women and political institutions in the global context with convincing statistics, and offers compelling arguments with regard to women’s roles and influences on policy-making, political leadership, and transnational governance in different democratic regimes and global organizations. The book chapters are closely connected and provide concise contents for researchers not only to understand the structural problems of different democracies in failing to provide women’s opportunities to enter the political field, but also to question the outcome of women’s underrepresentation as well as men’s overrepresentation in political institutions and organizations. Hence, Dahlerup’s *Has Democracy Failed Women* can be a rewarding reference to any researcher with an expertise in feminist studies, gender studies, leadership studies, and political science studies.

Works Cited

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