

How gender barriers affect the careers of women in government

*Debates about gender equality in politics often focus on the number of women elected to parliament or the number of women who hold positions in government. Yet as **Corinna Kroeber** and **Joanna Hüffelmann** explain, these debates often overlook the more subtle impact that gender barriers can have on women's political careers. Drawing on a new study, they show that women in government are often obliged to hold junior roles for longer than their male colleagues before gaining prestigious positions.*

Even after ministers have entered government, their career paths can progress very differently. Some are selected right away to the most pivotal and visible positions in cabinet, such as heading the ministries of finance, defence, or foreign affairs. Others remain in less prestigious posts for longer periods before eventually ascending to the top, while some never reach such a position at all.

We have compiled an original dataset containing information on the career paths of ministers in 27 European countries between 1990 and 2018. Our data shows that just over 42% of all ministers eventually receive a prestigious portfolio (1,912 of 4,548 in our sample). Interestingly, most of them reach these offices without any previous executive experience (82.9%). Of the remaining ministers who eventually assume responsibility for a prestigious portfolio, ministers worked on average around 29.5 months in less pivotal positions.

However, this aggregate figure hides considerable differences in the pace with which ministerial careers proceed, with the time it takes to reach a prestigious portfolio ranging from between 1 and 180 months. This raises the question of what explains these differences. Here, we explore two key explanations: opportunity structures and gender-specific barriers.

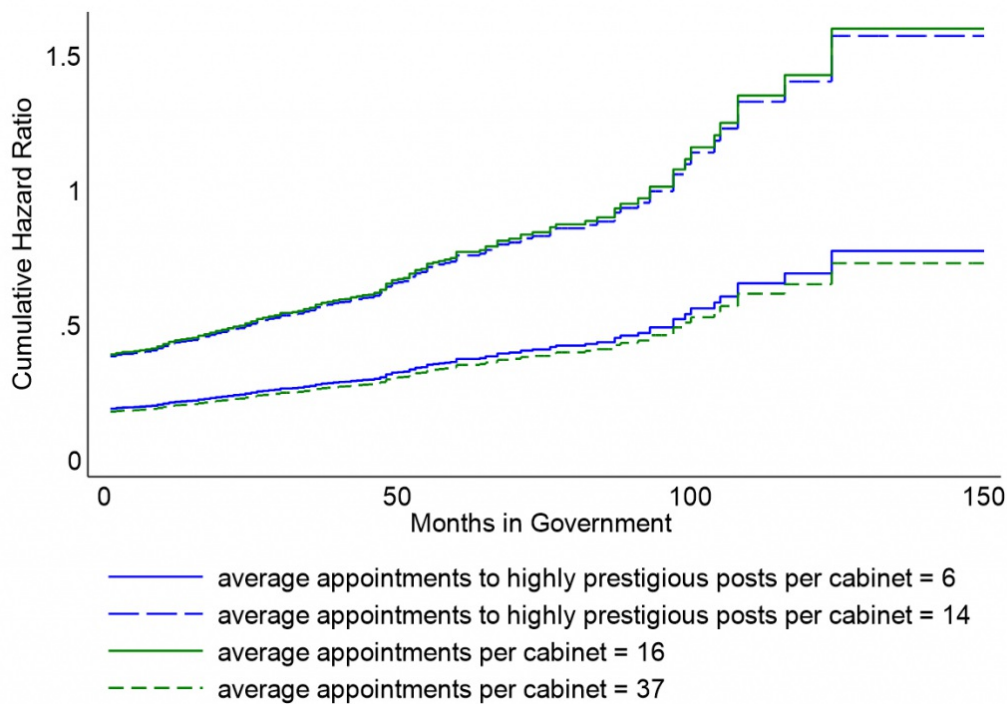
Opportunity structures

Previous studies [have argued](#) that how political careers proceed depends on the opportunities that politicians experience along the way. Opportunity structures are mostly shaped by the institutional and political environment. Notably, opportunities to ascend to prestigious roles decrease with the number of available positions (availability) and are affected by how fierce the competition is for these posts between candidates or parties (accessibility).

To investigate the role of opportunity structures empirically, we used our dataset to study whether ministers reached a prestigious post and the time it took them to get there. We captured opportunity structures using four variables: the number of cabinets a minister took part in before receiving a prestigious post or exiting government, the average number of governing parties in these cabinets, the number of overall appointments made within these cabinets, and the number of appointments to prestigious posts made within these cabinets.

Figure 1 illustrates some findings from a so called 'survival model' which assesses how the likelihood of a minister receiving a prestigious post changes over time. Initially, a minister working for a government that makes an average number of 14 appointments to prestigious posts is about 0.2 points more likely to receive a high-prestige position than a minister working for a government that only makes an average of 6 appointments to prestigious posts. However, over time, this gap multiplies. Our findings indicate that after 150 months in office, the gap rises to 1.0 points.

Figure 1: How the likelihood of reaching a prestigious position changes over time in cabinets with different average numbers of appointments



Note: Compiled by the authors.

In contrast, this kind of effect does not seem to be present with some of the other variables we considered. Ministers who are part of more cabinets overall have a greater likelihood of reaching a prestigious post, but the gap does not increase in size as ministerial careers become longer. Meanwhile, the average number of parties in a cabinet does not appear to have a clear effect on the speed with which ministers progress to a prestigious position.

Finally, the overall number of appointments made per cabinet appears to decrease the likelihood of ministers receiving prestigious portfolios. Figure 1 shows that ministers in smaller cabinets have more promising career prospects than those in larger cabinets and this gap increases over time. One potential explanation for this is that larger cabinets simply contain more ministers with less influential posts. Alternatively, more cabinet reshuffles might be an indicator of shorter ministerial careers.

Gender-specific barriers

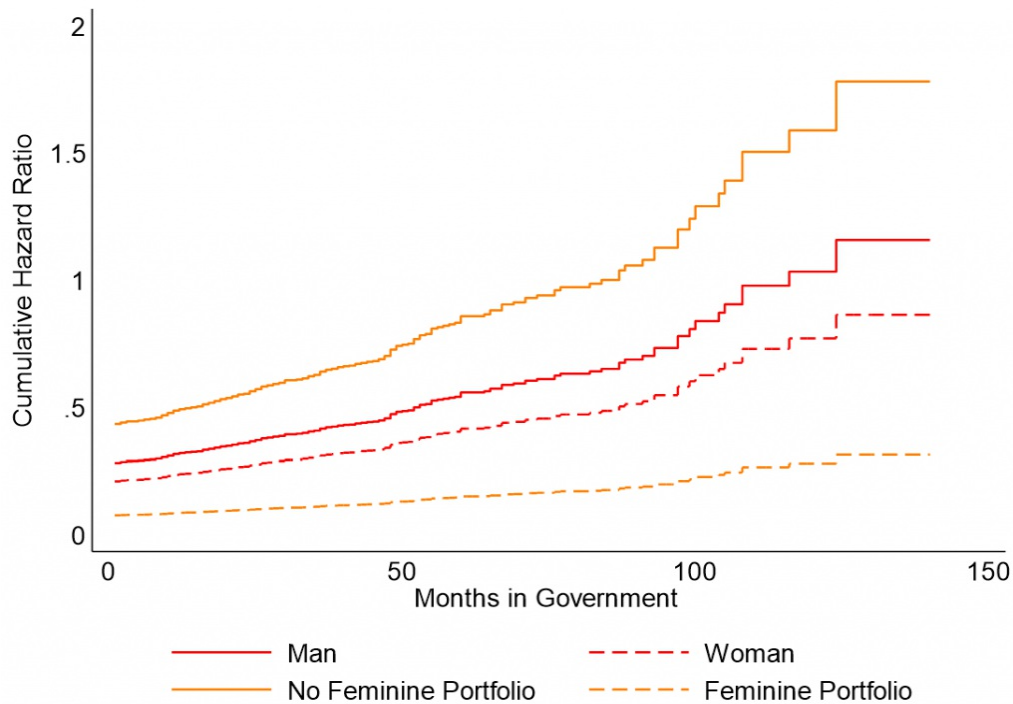
To what extent are gender-specific barriers to ministerial selection processes more influential than opportunity structures for the way ministerial careers unfold? We have investigated this question in a [recent study](#). Our analysis shows that women have to serve longer as ministers in less prestigious positions before getting to the top. We propose that one reason for this is that even after being selected as a minister, gatekeepers for ministerial positions hold prejudices about women's competence in relation to certain portfolios.

To overcome these prejudices, women have to demonstrate their capabilities more extensively or gather exceptionally high levels of experience compared with men during their time in charge of less pivotal portfolios. Moreover, we propose that holding portfolios strongly associated with feminine stereotypes reinforces doubts about aspirants' capacity to take on the most prestigious portfolios – an effect that holds true for both women and men.

To capture these dynamics, we included two dummy variables for the sex of ministers as well as for the gendered nature of ministerial portfolios in our analysis of the time it takes ministers to receive a prestigious position. Figure 2 displays these effects visually and shows that the effect sizes we observe appear to be substantial. The sex of ministers is just as decisive for their career advancement within cabinet as the number of appointments to prestigious posts.

Being a woman slows down the progress of ministerial careers to a similar extent as serving in cabinets with an average of 6 compared to 14 appointments to highly prestigious posts. The effect of the content of ministers' portfolios is even more pronounced, meaning that how responsibilities are linked to ideas about traditional role distributions between men and women in society is a key determinant for differences in ministerial career advancements.

Figure 2: How the likelihood of reaching a prestigious position changes over time by sex of minister and gendered nature of portfolio



Note: Compiled by the authors.

When it comes to understanding how ministers' careers unfold after entering government, opportunity structures appear to be less influential than gender-specific barriers. Despite being restricted by the same opportunity structures and women's increasing access to political office, the executive careers of men and women continue to look very different. Women are often sidelined for long periods in secondary portfolios with less prestige.

This pattern suggests that barriers to women's equal inclusion into politics are becoming subtler and more complex. A systematic study of the strategies applied by gatekeepers in this context would offer another timely contribution to the literature and help us to better understand the differences in the speed with which ministerial careers progress.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper in [Politics & Gender](#)

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