

Book Review: Shattered, Cracked or Firmly Intact? Women and the Executive Glass Ceiling Worldwide

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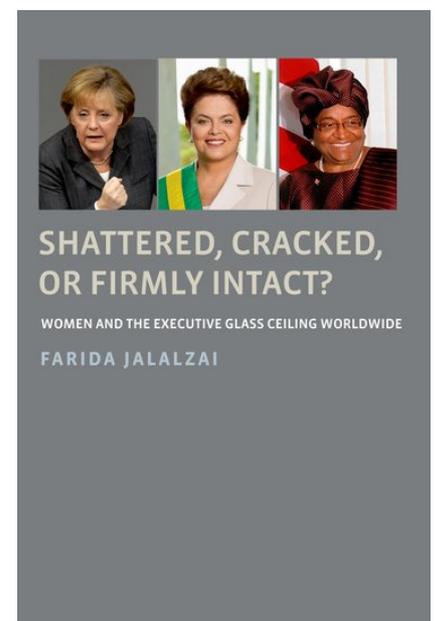
*In 1960, Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka made history when she was appointed the world's first woman prime minister. In the half-century following her achievement, fewer than eighty women worldwide have attained the office of prime minister or president. In **Shattered, Cracked, or Firmly Intact?**, **Farida Jalalzai** aims to explain the mechanisms that push politically active women into relatively weak posts and why women who successfully attain executive office almost always hail from political families within unstable systems. **Senia Cuevas** is impressed by this thorough text.*



Shattered, Cracked or Firmly Intact? Women and the Executive Glass Ceiling Worldwide. Farida Jalalzai. Oxford University Press. March 2013.

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In *Shattered, Cracked or Firmly Intact? Women and the Executive Glass Ceiling Worldwide*, [Farida Jalalzai](#) analyzes women's success in gaining executive office throughout the world. In the last decade the world has seen many more female leaders than ever before; in the 1990s, 26 women held executive posts throughout the world, increasing to 37 in the 2000s, which almost triples the number of women who held the same position in the '60s, '70s and '80s combined. But Jalalzai believes that many countries still have work to do: for the author, the glass ceiling has truly shattered in Finland (where three different women have come to executive power), only cracked in the UK (with Margaret Thatcher as the only example of a female prime minister), and remains firmly intact in the United States.



This book calls for a re-evaluation of our political systems and of female stereotypes as well as our understanding of the characteristics and personalities of leaders, and will appeal to political scientists, policy makers, and sociologists. Jalalzai's examination of women's representation is not limited to gender, but also extends to political system, region, political context, international position and relevant country context, as well as the personal and professional qualities of the women who reached office. The author uses both quantitative data and qualitative data, the latter including case studies by region of the women who have successfully reached executive office, as well as an appendix with biographies of all women who have gained executive office from 1960-2010. This study is a comparative analysis of both men and women and the degree to which women's paths and powers are similar or different to those of men.



In chapter 3, "Women Executives: Positions, Selections, Systems and Powers," Jalalzai intelligently outlines the number of women globally since the 1960s who have reached executive office, highlighting regional patterns and individual case studies from across the Americas, Asia, and Europe. The author analyzes whether women have made substantial progress towards obtaining executive office, concluding that despite gains in women's legislative representation, women still face many challenges in their pursuit of executive office. Jalalzai writes, "Although several constraints work against women's ascension to executive office, women can overcome some of these hurdles, particularly within politically unstable contexts, frequently ones where kinship ties play decisive roles in power succession" (p.113). Jalalzai attributes other barriers to political office to traditional female stereotypes associated with female subordination to masculine qualities, and their confinement to the private sphere, especially in traditionally religious societies.

Jalalzai also finds that female leaders are more likely to gain executive office in parliamentary systems than in presidential systems. In presidential systems, the president has more authority and independent power than in parliamentary systems, while in parliamentary systems, prime ministers rely more on parliament for survival, and for them it is harder to act unilaterally. Over 300 different women have run for executive office, only 21 have been successful in attaining the position. Additionally, of those who have gained executive office 16 of them have gained office in presidential systems though only 3 of them have been characterized as weak presidencies, serving only as figureheads or sharing substantial power with a male official, the rest of the female leaders have displayed dominant qualities and have exercised most executive authority. On the other hand, all six women who have gained office in parliamentary systems are characterized as weak. The author makes some suggestions as to why the parliamentary system is more favorable for women: "Women are more likely than their male counterparts to espouse leadership styles based on consensus building, whereas men exert control and power" (p. 43), and "...rarely identified as strong actors taking unilateral control, women are more often connected to softer more collaborative leadership styles... Women experience greater difficulty in being popularly elected and rely more on appointment" (p.54). Thus parliamentary systems are more favorable for the political progress of women, and increase the probability of women gaining executive office; however, "prime ministers generally exercise fewer powers than do dominant presidents, govern within more collaborative frameworks, and remain subject to early dismissal (p. 79).

In chapter 5, "General Backgrounds of Female Leaders," Jalalzai makes some interesting observations about the women who have been able to gain executive office. She finds that women are as qualified as men to hold executive office in terms of education, but it is rather in the type of political experience that the two diverge, maintaining that "the tendency to analyze only formal office holding substantially underestimates women's political participation" (p. 84). Therefore, Jalalzai uses a more encompassing model to measure political experience. She explains that women tend to move between "feminine" posts, those focused on human or social services as opposed to masculine posts which are concentrated on the military, security or defense. Jalalzai finds that women who reached executive office for the most part had prior experience in masculine posts. She writes, "No women executives first entered cabinet posts as defense ministers, though some did subsequent to their first appointment" (p. 89). For example, Michelle Bachelet of Chile was first appointed as Minister of Health and then as Minister of Defense before she eventually ran and won the presidency in 2006.

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Credit: [franz88](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

development of a trend in Jalazai's analysis: women need more than their educational background and experience to reach executive offices; they need family ties, influence, or to reinforce female stereotypes to gain executive office – as in the cases of Asia and Latin America, which are traditionally religious societies with set beliefs in the role of women. No woman has ever reached power through force, and none of those who have successfully gained executive office have had any military background. Instead, women who have reached executive posts have taken advantage of very particular circumstances. For example, Angela Merkel of Germany took advantage of the [corruption charges against her competitors](#) and a vote of no confidence towards her predecessor, Chancellor Schröder, to gain office by forming a grand coalition that gained her chancellorship in 2005. She started her political career in 1989 with the Christian Democratic Union, and eventually served as Minister for Women and Youth, Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety. She was later elected as party leader in 2000, and ran successfully with the support of the Social Democrats after careful party negotiations in 2005 and remains in office. Another example is Violeta Chamorro in Nicaragua, who appeased competing party interests that began to break up the United National Opposition (UNO). She was the widow of a prominent activist in Nicaragua who opposed the Somoza military regime and who eventually got assassinated for his political views. She ran for office on behalf of the UNO a decade after her husband's assassination and won by popular vote. Familial ties, volatile situations and democratic transitions have helped women ascend to executive office, but consolidation has proven a more difficult task. Men have also benefited from these connections but to a lesser extent, they do not solely depend on these conditions to gain office.

The analysis of women's political power in this book is only applicable to women's capacity to obtain executive office. Further case studies of Hillary Clinton and Segolene Royal allow for the possible explanations of why women have not been successful in obtaining executive office in some of the most influential countries in the world. While presidents are almost always men because men pursue these power positions more often, it is also true that even when women run, they almost never win. We must further examine the attitudes that hinder women from gaining executive office as well as the desirable characteristics we pursue in a leader, especially in the face of challenging world situations.

Overall this book provides excellent insights in to the status of women worldwide and ultimately their ability to gain executive office. The answer to the title of the book is clearly mixed, inconclusive, and varies geographically. We must further evaluate the successes and failures of women once they are in office to infer more clearly on why the attitudes and stereotypes about women still have not changed substantially despite increased representation.

Senia Cuevas is a political scientist with an MA in Diplomacy and International Relations from Seton Hall University, New Jersey, with expertise in Latin American studies and International Economic Development and a focus on diplomacy. Senia's previous work deals with the state of democracy, foreign policy, politics and economic issues in Latin America. Currently, she works for a non-profit organization in New York. [Read more reviews by Senia.](#)

