

Book Review: Women of Power: Half a Century of Female Presidents and Prime Ministers Worldwide by Torild Skard

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Women of Power is an ambitious project, one which attempts to map the contribution of all 73 female presidents and prime ministers across the globe onto the political landscape. **Katherine Williams** finds this a valuable contribution to the fields of gender studies and political history. Author **Torild Skard** contributes her own fascinating comments at the foot of the review.

Women of Power: Half a Century of Female Presidents and Prime Ministers Worldwide. Torild Skard. Policy Press. 2014.

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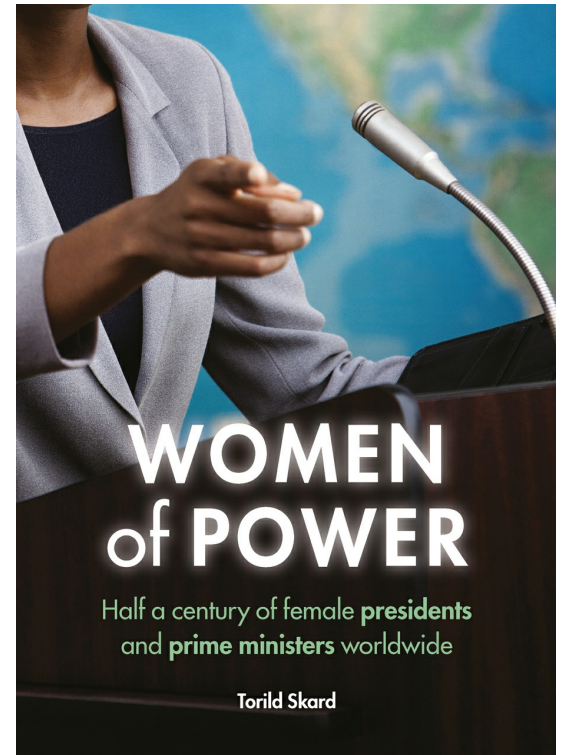
Women of Power by [Torild Skard](#) – a Norwegian feminist researcher, social activist, first woman president of the Norwegian Upper House, former director of the Status of Women for UNESCO Paris, and former regional director of UNICEF West and Central Africa – is an extremely knowledgeable and conscientious text. Detailing all 73 female presidents and prime ministers from across 53 countries, the text incorporates the history of female leaders into that of the women's liberation movement which began to gain international prominence from the 1960s onwards.

The emergence of female leaders, it seems, was, and perhaps still is, inseparable from the narratives of ordinary women hoping to get their voices heard on the international stage through their respective organisations. Such grassroots organisation amongst women worldwide culminated in a milestone event: the International Women's Year World Conference held in Mexico City in 1975; an event Skard recalls with affection and a litany of amusing personal anecdotes.

As I have discussed in [previous reviews](#), it is my opinion that the crux of feminist movements, or waves, has been that old feminist adage, the personal is political. Skard's own story – her interest in feminism and politics from a young age, her formal education, and experiences as a female politician – contribute to a broad feminist discourse that promotes women's inclusion in world politics, promoting change from the grassroots upwards.

Women of Power is broken down into ten regional chapters which provide an overview into the history, motivations, and contributions of female leaders across the world. The text also incorporates world developments, discussion of those tricky conceptual and methodological issues that plague any academic project, and a helpful final chapter which breaks down each regional analysis into bite size chunks. Most of the chapters in the text can be read standalone. Skard's extensive bibliography will also direct students, academics and readers alike onwards to a diverse range of source material for their own research interests.

In her introductory chapter, Skard explains the importance of a work like *Women of Power*. She makes it clear that whilst the text may fall under the remit of gender studies (which as discipline can focus on women or men, or both), women are its exclusive subject (p. 1). However, Skard states that she does not see women in isolation from men; it is often the case that in the political arena, men (who are overrepresented and tend to hold most power) often play a



role in determining the conditions for women's participation in political life (p. 2). Whilst organisations such as the United Nations have promoted women's rights and political change in various regions across the world, Skard's examination of women leaders offers the reader a comprehensive insight into the dynamics of change; when women reached the pinnacle of power in their respective countries, did they act in the same way as their male counterparts, or did they enact transformative change? (p.2) Ultimately, women are vastly underrepresented and under researched in political life generally, and there is an inherent need for more analysis of women's political behaviour and opinion; such is the aim of *Women in Power*.



Two regional chapters that caught my eye were “Machismo, Marianismo and Modernism in Latin America”, and “Eastern Bloc: from Communism to Capitalism”.

“Machismo, Marianismo and Modernism in Latin America” describes how women in the region have transformed the face of international politics post military dictatorship in their respective countries. From Violeta Chamorro, President of Nicaragua after the Ortega regime was ousted, to Michelle Bachelet of Chile, and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner of Argentina, women heralded what Skard describes as a ‘third wave of democratisation’ (p. 205) in Latin American countries.

Machismo values have traditionally dominated Latin American society, as Skard notes, ‘the distinction between private and public was emphasised, and the public (political) sphere was marked by the values of the Spanish conquistadores: physical strength, manliness, and military prowess.’ (p. 207). Politics in the region was a distinctly male affair; women could only be seen to exert any kind of influence in the home and associated feminine spaces. However, despite the obstacles women faced in asserting their political identities, one event, the aforementioned International Women’s Year World Conference held in Mexico City in 1975, helped women in the region and the world over to participate in democratic mobilisation. Whilst the political gains for women in the region may not have been immediately effective, a forum for women’s voices now existed, paving the way for future women leaders.

Similarly, in “Eastern Bloc: from Communism to Capitalism”, Skard endeavours to map the social changes that were instigated after the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc in the early 1990s. Whilst the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 should have heralded a new age of equality for women across the region, the reality was that women were further

excluded from political spaces, as entrenched patriarchal norms held prominence and posited women in their time-honoured realm, that of the home. Whilst socialist thinking dictates (for want of a better word...) that women are as equal as their male counterparts, this did not correspond to a political reality, especially as totalitarian ideology began to gain its insidious foothold in the region.

Whilst Skard's analysis of women leader in the former Eastern Bloc is comprehensive and well researched, there is, for me, something of a glaring omission. If Skard intended to write a profile of all female prime ministers and presidents since 1960, then I would expect to see Biljana Plavšić, former president of the Republika Srpska (not to be confused with the Republic of Serbia!) included in the text. As it happens, Biljana Plavšić was indicted by the International Criminal Court in The Hague on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity in 2001. Perhaps Plavšić is not the best poster woman for Skard's celebration of female leaders, but her presidency, her actions during the Bosnian War, and its impact on the region are arguably still worthy of further discussion.

Another small issue that I encountered with *Women of Power* was one of a distinctly grammatical nature. The text was translated from Norwegian into English by the author herself, with the assistance of NORLA (Norwegian Organisation of Non-Fiction Writers and Translators). At points I found some sections hard to read because of the resultant changes made during the translation process. Some sentences were either too long, or far too short, and some of the vocabulary used seemed archaic.

All in all, *Women of Power* is a valuable resource to those who seek an insight in to the struggle women have faced in becoming leaders in their own right. Alongside the life histories of the women in question, Skard offers detailed analyses of political developments and gives brief historical overviews of each region at the beginning of each chapter. My minor observations, I hope, do not detract from the fact that the text is a highly informative, knowledgeable and valuable contribution to the fields of gender studies and political history.

Katherine Williams graduated from Swansea University in 2011 with a BA in German and Politics, and is currently studying for a MA in International Security and Development. Her academic interests include the de/construction of gender in IR, conflict-driven sexual violence, and memory and reconciliation politics. You can follow her on Twitter [@polygluttony](#). [Read more reviews by Katherine](#).

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