SUMMARY

This study set out to examine obstacles to women's parliamentary representation in 27 western democracies. Women's political underrepresentation internationally is a cause of concern to international organisations such as the UN, Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Council of Europe and the EU, who have commissioned research, published reports and urged national governments to acknowledge and address the democratic deficit in their legislatures.

Women's workforce participation has long been associated with increased interest and participation in political matters. However, with growing educational and employment opportunity over the past two decades, women's parliamentary participation has continued to lag, and in 1999 stands at 13 percent, just over half-way to holding a quarter of parliamentary seats.

Much of the recent research on women's legislative participation focuses on electoral institutions, in the belief that women's increasing economic independence, if incapable of translating into eligibility for political office, must encounter hidden barriers in the candidate selection process. The failure by women to convert economic capital into political resources has brought the research focus to political recruitment practice, in order to identify the stage of the political process at which impediments typically present.

Analysis of cultural, socioeconomic and political variables followed an Extensive-Intensive research design. Quantitative analysis of women's political opportunity in 27 nations was followed by intensive scrutiny of selected variables in a number of test cases. Using 16 independent variables, including percent of population Catholic, worldview, women economically active, fertilty, women graduates, GNP, electoral system, district magnitude, preferential voting, the percent of Right and Left in parliament, bivariate and multivariate statistical analysis established that cultural variables provide the strongest predictor of women's election across the nations studied, followed by political factors. In the intensive section, these findings were tested in selected polities, confirming that worldview and political factors are the best predictors of women's electoral opportunity.