

# Women Leading the World

By Melinda Murphy



Women seeking equality with men in politics is as old as time itself. Across the globe for decades women have held rallies and marches bringing light to issues that affect them: reproductive rights, violence against women, workplace equality and, of course, suffrage.

Just earning the right to vote has been an arduous journey for women. New Zealand became the first country to allow women to cast their ballots back in 1893. The most recent country to open up the polls to women is Saudi Arabia, whose King Abdullah issued a decree in 2011, ordering that women be allowed to vote and stand as candidates. However, the first opportunity to vote did not come until December 2015, almost a year after his death.

Becoming a head of state has been even more challenging. Oh sure, there have been queens over the centuries, going all the way back to 1806 BC when Egypt's Sobekneferu ruled. After her death, it took 400 more years before another woman, Hatshepsut, would be named pharaoh. And guess what? She was referred to as a king and not a queen.

The road for woman to run a country in modern times was paved by many extraordinary women taking on other leadership positions in politics. The first woman ambassador in modern history was Alexandra Kollontai, appointed ambassador from the Soviet Union to Sweden in 1932. Imagine what it was like to be her, negotiating between men back when women weren't supposed to even have an opinion. Oh, to have been a fly on the wall during those discussions!

In 1945, Eleanor Roosevelt became the American delegate for the recently-formed United Nations. A year later, she was elected as the head of the United Nations Human Rights Commission, helping draft the Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948.

But for a woman to become a head of state, well that was a different story. In fact, more than 70 countries have had a female head of state (three-quarters of them have come to office since 1990), though many were appointed to or inherited the position. Rarely does a woman win the popular vote, somewhat the opposite of what happened in the 2016 US election when Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, but did not earn the presidency. (American elections are decided by the electoral college and not the popular vote).

In 1960, Sirivamo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka became the world's first female elected Premier Minister. In 1974, Argentina's Isabel Martinez de Peron became the first modern female president of any nation, inheriting the office when her husband Juan Peron died in office (she had been his Vice President).

It took Iceland's Vigdís Finnbogadóttir to break the ice, so to speak, to become the world's first democratically-elected female president. She served from 1980 to 1996, making her the longest-serving, elected female head of state ever.

According to an article in the *International Business Times*, if you want to rule a country in Asia, you'll need some sort of nepotistic connection. Most have been wives or daughters of rulers. Indira Gandhi was pretty unusual. Even though she was the daughter of a Prime Minister, she refused to assume the role when he died. Instead, she chose to become a cabinet minister and, in 1966 (seven years after her father died), she won an election to become the Prime Minister. She served from 1966-1977 and again from 1980 until her assassination in 1984.

Of course, the number of countries with a female in power is a bit misleading. Why? Because in some cases, these women have only remained in power for months – or days even. According to a study by the World Economic Forum, only 33 countries have had a female leader for four years or more since 1966. The top country may surprise you: Bangladesh which has had a female leader for 23 of the last 50 years! The same study found that gender imbalances in politics is greater than in health, education or employment.

So how does the US compare to other nations in other government leadership roles? Not too good. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, women make up roughly 20 percent of the US Congress and 12 percent of US governors. That puts the US 99 out of 193 countries, between Kenya and Kyrgyzstan, and it means there are fewer likely candidates for president. Then again, President Trump does not have a background in government. Perhaps the first US female president won't either.



## Women's Suffrage

When and where did women earn the right to vote?

- 1893 New Zealand
- 1902 Australia
- 1906 Finland
- 1913 Norway
- 1915 Denmark
- 1917 Canada
- 1918 Austria, Germany, Poland, Russia
- 1919 Netherlands
- 1920 United States
- 1921 Sweden
- 1928 Britain, Ireland
- 1931 Spain
- 1934 Turkey
- 1944 France
- 1945 Italy
- 1947 Argentina, Japan, Mexico, Pakistan
- 1949 China
- 1950 India
- 1954 Colombia
- 1957 Malaysia, Zimbabwe
- 1962 Algeria
- 1963 Iran, Morocco
- 1964 Libya
- 1967 Ecuador
- 1971 Switzerland
- 1972 Bangladesh
- 1974 Jordan
- 1976 Portugal
- 1989 Namibia
- 1990 Western Samoa
- 1993 Kazakhstan, Moldova
- 1994 South Africa
- 2005 Kuwait
- 2006 United Arab Emirates
- 2011 Saudi Arabia



# Women Leading the Way

By Bill Poorman



She knew she was ready to go. Gillian Griffiths, a Senior Tax Manager with Deloitte & Touche LLP here in Singapore, had already spent several years working in London. Now came the chance to expand her professional and personal horizons.

"For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to work overseas," says Griffiths. "The idea of exploring exciting new lands, experiencing different cultures and gaining another perspective on life really appealed to me. I feel very privileged to have now had the opportunity to do this."

And along for the ride came her husband, Matt Griffiths. The Griffiths' move is part of a growing trend of women taking the lead in international assignments.

According to a recent paper published by researchers Yvonne McNulty and Kate Hutchings, women filled only three percent of international assignments in the early 1990s, but that rose to 19% in 2015. Based on an estimated 8.5 million corporate expats worldwide, that's more than one-and-a-half million women globally. About half of those are estimated to be the primary breadwinner for a family. The exact number of female expat employees in Singapore isn't available from the Ministry of Manpower. However, nearly 190,000 people here hold an Employment Pass, so if the global estimates hold, there could be more than 30,000.

Samantha Bonamour is HP's Head of Personal Systems Marketing for Asia Pacific and Japan. She moved to Singapore less than a year ago with her husband and son on her third expat assignment.

She says she jumped at the chance to gain professional experience in Asia.

"China and India are key areas of growth for our business, as they are for many businesses. Having the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of these countries was certainly something high up on my list."

And as is true for many expat employees, Bonamour says she was also fortunate that her family was excited to make the move from San Diego, California.

"Personally, I have restless soul syndrome (and) so does my better half! I love new experiences, adventures, the opportunity to experience and appreciate the people, other cultures and the beauty our amazing diverse planet has to offer. You can never truly appreciate a country until you have lived in it."

*Bill Poorman is a part-time writer who, for the last several years, has been a full-time member of the unpaid economy – that is, he's been a stay-at-home dad, raising two boys. The family moved to Singapore just over a year ago for his wife's job. Prior to all of that, Bill was a radio journalist and media producer.*