

October 2024

Call for proposals: primary research partners **Navigating gender equality and class-based divisions in politics**

About this call

Social attitudes and norms about women's political leadership have witnessed some positive shifts over the last three decades; this has resulted in an increased, albeit still low, representation of women in politics. This improvement, however, has not been the case for all women in their diversity. Women from racial and religious minorities from lower-class backgrounds continue to be systematically underrepresented and marginalized in formal political institutions (Souza Chavez et al, [2024](#); Carnes and Lupu; [2023](#)).

Exclusions and marginalization of women in politics based on class – or socio-economic status – need urgent attention because they negatively impact democracies and gender equality. Anti-gender and anti-feminist actors weaponize difference and use populist narratives around class and race, ethnicity, caste or religious identities to roll back rights.

In response to these pressing concerns about democratic representation and gender equality, ALIGN is launching a new research project: **Navigating gender equality & class-based divisions in politics**. We are currently looking for a partner organisation in the Majority World to conduct empirical research that will contribute to our understanding of how class-based norms and intersectional identities shape women's ability to pursue gender equality and justice through sub-national politics.

Background

Despite the growing recognition that gender inequalities are at once classed, racialized, and affected by other social structures (Harper et al., [2020](#)), there is limited knowledge about the ways that women politicians navigate class-based differences. This lack of evidence and insight is partially driven by scholarly debates about the definition of class and its usefulness to understanding political participation in various countries and regions (see for example Carola Lenz [2015](#) on class in African countries).

Understanding class difference in politics is urgent and important. In the context of growing socio-economic inequalities in many parts of the world, anti-gender and anti-feminist actors weaponize difference and use populist narratives around class and race, ethnicity, caste or religious identities to roll back rights (Higgins and Smith, [2024](#)). Their divisive attacks weaken the potential for intersectional politics and ultimately may contribute to democratic backsliding, because anti-democratic sentiments are partially fuelled by people's disillusionment with political institutions, and a sense of disconnect from people who are supposed to represent their interests (de Jong and Mügge, [2023](#); Montoya et al., [2022](#)).

Many populist leaders mobilize voters for gender-restrictive values by portraying politicians as corrupt and self-interested elites and pitching them against the working classes and the poor, as was the case for example with William Ruto in Kenya (Cheeseman and Kamencu, [2022](#)). In some countries, these populist leaders position themselves as 'one of the people' despite being highly educated, economically privileged or from white collar professions. In other contexts, populist leaders,

especially men, build their political platforms and personas on their lack of formal education or connections and networks to established elites. Yet in other contexts, such as the UK or the US, studies find that voters hold negative perceptions of working-class politicians, which is especially impacting women candidates and their electability (Kim and Kweon, [2024](#)).

In addition to narratives about political elites, class is also a central form of difference within political institutions. Class – understood in the context of this study as socio-economic positionality associated with one’s wealth, education, and employment – shapes how politicians work together or what expectations, prejudices and assumptions they may hold of each other. At the same time, attitudes and behaviours based on socio-economic class are also mutually affected by caste, religion and ethnicity (see for example Lotter ([2018](#)) on elite politics and caste in Nepal). Equally importantly, however, class also affects what policies politicians support, also known as substantive representation (Siow, [2023](#)). For example, Warburton et al. ([2021](#)) find that in the world’s third largest democracy, Indonesia, lower classes’ policy preferences on some economic issues, such as redistribution, are not represented by the elite in politics. Traber et al. ([2022](#)) conclude that ‘there is virtually no case where preferences of the poor are better represented than those of the rich’.

Intersectional analysis thus complicates the assumption that women, based on their shared gendered experiences of patriarchy, may seek to act politically across class-based differences to achieve gender equitable outcomes. This assumption, supported by some evidence (Bailer et al., [2022](#)) has partially driven the calls for gender quotas to achieve a minimal critical mass of women to represent women’s interests in elected decision-making bodies, such as parliaments. However, various other variables, including gender norms within political parties, affect women’s ability to exercise political power. Moreover, intersectional analyses also suggest that gender quotas do not automatically lead to the representation of women in their diversity, i.e. from different classes or ethnicities (see for example Stockemer and Sundström, [2021](#); Hughes, [2011](#)).

Research objectives, impact & methods

This project seeks to critically examine how women in politics understand their role as representatives of various socio-economic groups and interests; and how they navigate class-based intersectional identities, norms and issues in their acts of representation (Brown et al., [2023](#); Ranta, [2024](#)).

The research should seek to fill important gaps in understanding class-based exclusions in their intersection with other forms of marginalization, which have been neglected in the analyses of political participation and meaningful representation of women’s interests (Akin-Aina, [2011](#); Spark et al., [2019](#)).

The research should address the following questions:

- How do women in sub-national politics understand their representative function and role, especially of women and women’s interests? What do they perceive as their desired impact and outcome of representation?
- How, if at all, do women consider their class positionality when representing women’s interests? And how, if at all, do they believe class norms, in their intersection with other differences, shape their roles as representatives?
- What strategies do they use to achieve their desired policy impact? What type of political action and alliances, for example, do they pursue?

The project focuses on sub-national politics, understood within the context of this study as provincial, state or municipal levels, depending on the federal or unitary nature of the state. We anticipate this research to deal with the diverse array of political issues within the remit of sub-national governments, such as welfare support, taxation and government spending on public healthcare or education, as well as political actions, such as creation of women caucuses or cross-party mobilization for specific bills.

Researchers could consider how women politicians from poorer constituencies in provincial parliaments have sought to identify bills that would have differentiated, class impact, such as increase government spending to provide free childcare in maternity wards in local hospitals. The research could map how these politicians tried to get support for such initiatives, successfully or not, be it from women politicians from other parties and factions, men of the same class background, or civil society such as labour movements, women's rights organisations, or media.

The study focuses on countries which:

- 1) Are located in global majority countries
- 2) Have high levels of socio-economic inequalities
- 3) Experience crisis of democratic rule or early stages of democratic consolidation
- 4) Have some type of gender quota at sub-national level

The level of inequality or democratic decline in countries of interest are not pre-defined, but can be proposed by the interested researchers. Applications should, therefore, describe how their specific context of study is affected by these issues and why their context offers a fruitful context for this research.

Methods

There are no pre-determined research methods for this study. Interested researchers are encouraged to identify research methods and data collection processes that will allow them to investigate the above research questions within the timeframe and budget specified below. We encourage interested partners to propose innovative and experimental methods and to incorporate best practices on researching gender norms.

Desired impact

The research will offer insights and good practice suggestions for political leaders and civil society supporting women's political representation, as well as for an array of donor-funded programmes and organisations that train women to be more effective political candidates and representatives.

Timelines, budgets, and outputs

The project expected start date is **mid-January 2025**, as soon as all research partners are selected and contracted, and will last approximately **12 months**, including project dissemination.

The envisioned budget is between **GBP £35,000 – £40,000**.

The partner organisation is expected to appoint a Research Lead, who will collaborate with the ALIGN team. The research partner organisation will be responsible for the following tasks. (*Please note this list is indicative and not exhaustive and will be finalized in collaboration with the selected partner*):

- Develop a research workplan in collaboration with the ALIGN team
- Design and pilot research instruments
- Complete any ethical reviews required domestically and at ODI
- Conduct data collection, analysis and writing of a research report, and obtain peer review of the paper from peers with local context knowledge. This paper will be in the ALIGN format (we will provide publication and editing support). Should it be of interest, the partner should also plan for translation to one additional language of relevance.
- Deliver a presentation of learning at an ALIGN knowledge sharing event, webinar or virtual conference.

Who can apply?

ALIGN invites applications from organisations with a **proven track record of research activities** on gender, politics and intersectionality. It is important that interested partners demonstrate their ability to gain access to women politicians, especially if data collection will entail key informant interviews. Knowledge and experience with gender norms research is a distinct advantage.

Applicants should also have in-depth knowledge and registered presence in their country of research interest. For administrative reasons, all **applicants must have institutional or organisational** set-up, meaning that individual researchers/consultants are unfortunately not able to apply. All organisations must also have **indemnity insurance or a locally relevant equivalent** that provides cover for professional services.

How to apply

The application will be a two-stage process.

Stage 1: Interested organisations should submit a brief (up to 4-page) expression of interest which should include:

- A description of the suggested country context (political and gender related issues and factors, including the relevance of socio-economic class and caste differences, as well as current challenges to democracy) and demonstrate why this research is relevant and feasible in the country.
- Research problem, objective and questions (building on and adding further detail to the research questions of the project listed in the previous section).
- Proposed research methods (bearing in mind the duration and budget limitations).
- Relevant track record of the organisation and of the principal investigator as an individual.
- Desired impact/contribution to the local research and practice.

Stage 2: Short-listed applicants will be invited to submit a full proposal and a writing sample and attend an interview with the ALIGN team. The full application will include a budget of all activities. We anticipate the applications to be submitted by 25 November 2024.

Please submit your Expression of Interest to align@odi.org.uk by close of business on 31 October 2024.