

4 Crossing intersections

Overcoming the challenges of cross-national research on the legislative representation of women from marginalized groups¹

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Women make up more than half the world's population, but they have long been underrepresented in electoral politics. Most countries have never elected a woman president or prime minister, and in national legislatures – institutions often expressly designed to represent “the people” – women typically hold less than one-quarter of the seats. Over the last two decades, the face of national legislatures has changed: the number of women in parliament more than doubled (from 9 percent to 21 percent), for the first time a country elected to parliament more women than men (Rwanda), and the number of countries without women in their elected national legislature dwindled to three (Micronesia, Qatar, and Vanuatu). Women, although still outnumbered by men in almost all elite political bodies, have made significant inroads.

As more women move into national politics, scholars have successfully identified many of the key political, structural, and cultural factors that influence women's legislative success (Paxton, Kunovich and Hughes 2007). For example, the existence of proportional representation (PR) electoral systems and, more recently, gender quotas can increase the number female parliamentarians (e.g. Dahlerup 2006; Kenworthy and Malami 1999; Krook 2009; Paxton 1997; Paxton, Hughes and Painter 2010; Tripp and Kang 2008). Women's movements, international organizations, and political leaders have drawn from this knowledge to press for political institutions and electoral rules known to facilitate greater inclusion of women in politics.

Although cross-national research on women's access to political power has moved forward with great speed, quality and abundance, it tends to ignore a basic fact: not all women are the same. Feminist scholars, in particular, have been critical of the ways in which researchers tend to study the forces of marginalization in compartmentalized ways (e.g. Crenshaw 1989). That is, by focusing on women as an undifferentiated collective, we ignore *intersectionality*: the ways that race, ethnicity, class, religion, language, and sexuality intersect with gender to impact women's identities, interests, and outcomes (Collins 2000; Choo and Ferree 2010; Crenshaw 1989; Hancock 2007; Thornton Dill and Zambrana 2009). The intersectionality paradigm calls for researchers to examine the disparities in access to political power between women from marginalized groups – here called “minor-

ity women”² – and majority women (and men of either status). The intersectional challenge also requires a re-examination of the factors that influence women’s legislative success, and to question whether they operate similarly for all groups of women (Hughes 2013a).

Across countries we have limited information about which women are gaining power, which women remain excluded, and why. A primary reason is that intersectionality in women’s political representation has received little empirical attention. For the most part, only a handful of studies in Western countries like the US and Canada have explored the dynamics of minority women’s legislative representation (e.g. Black 2000; Fraga et al. 2005; Smooth 2001; but see Htun and Ossa 2013). Without comparative research scholars cannot understand how the intersecting identities of minority women influence their political representation across different contexts (Weldon 2006).

In order for cross-national intersectional research on women’s political representational inequality to proceed, however, we first must develop a methodology. In this chapter, I discuss three challenges for such scholarship: selection, comparability and measures of legislative success. In terms of selection, how do we identify “minorities” across countries? Attached to the selection problem is that of comparability: how can we compare minority women who live in very different societal contexts? I discuss methodological guidelines for researchers to identify and compare minority women across countries and time. Finally, I discuss the problem of using “percent women in parliament” as the standard measure for women’s political inclusion, and some possible solutions. Throughout, I address these challenges by drawing from data that breaks down national legislatures around the world by both gender and minority status (see Hughes 2011, 2013b).

Before I turn to the methodological challenges of research on minority women’s legislative representation, I first outline the case for intersectionality as an important concern for political inequality scholars.

The case for intersectional research

Disaggregating the category of “women” is important for at least two reasons. Practically, because minority women may have political interests distinct from other groups, it is important to gauge the degree to which minority women are able to represent themselves politically (e.g. Bratton, Haynie, and Reingold 2007; Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2011). If only women benefiting from the privilege of majority status are represented in the policymaking arena, policy interventions targeted towards women as a group may ineffectively serve the special needs of minority women (Crenshaw 1994; Hancock 2007). Similarly, if minority group rights are articulated by only male voices, the culture that is receiving protection or advancement may be anti-feminist (Okin 1999). Taken together, these statements suggest the importance of ensuring that the political voices of minority women are heard.

Treating women as a single collective also has important implications for scholarship: by ignoring minority women’s differences, we may do a poor job explain-

ing why women are better represented in politics in some countries compared to others. In some contexts, factors related to gender alone might explain inequality. Take Qatar, for example, where no women were elected to the national legislature in 2010. All Qatari women – whether Arab or South Asian and whether Sunni, Shiite, Christian or Hindu – were governed by an all-male legislature. In places like Qatar, majority and minority women alike are excluded from politics (or are substantially underrepresented) on the basis of sex alone. In other countries, however, it may be gender’s intersection with race, ethnicity, and religion that best explains the legislative outcomes of women. Without attention to forms of marginalization other than gender, we may miss important parts of the story.

To illustrate this point, consider the composition of national legislatures in Burundi and Israel, countries where ethnic and/or religious minorities comprise between 15 and 20 percent of the population. First, we will do what is typical of comparative research on women’s legislative representation and look at the percentage of women represented in each country’s national legislature, shown in Panels A and B of Figure 4.1 below. In Burundi, women comprise almost a third of the legislature, 31 percent, whereas in Israel, women occupy less than half that share of seats (just 14 percent). Typically, then, researchers would search for explanations for the political success of women in Burundi or the political failures of women in Israel, and these explanations are usually about gender. For example,

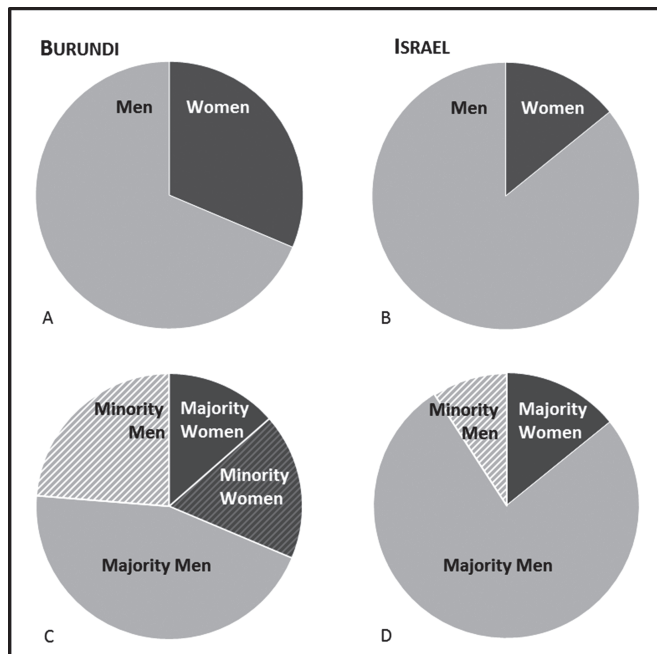


Figure 4.1 Breakdown of seats in Burundi’s and Israel’s national legislatures by gender and minority status

we know that the rate of women's labor force participation in Burundi is more than 50 percent higher than in Israel (World Bank 2013). Higher numbers of women in paid work may mean a larger pool of women willing and able to compete against men for political office (Paxton and Hughes 2013). Mystery solved?

Before we accept the plausible explanation presented above, let us take our thought experiment even further and break down the legislatures of Burundi and Israel not just by gender but by majority/minority status (the Hutu majority vs Tutsi and Twa minorities³ in Burundi and the Jewish majority vs Arab Muslim, Christian Palestinian and Druze minorities in Israel). See Panels C and D in Figure 4.1. What becomes clear from this exercise is that women from majority groups in both Burundi and Israel are represented at similar levels – both around 14 percent of legislative seats. But, when we compare the political representation of women from minority groups, they hold 18 percent of seats in Burundi (greater than their population share) and zero seats in Israel (although these groups make up 19 percent of the population). This second comparison calls into question our first explanation. It appears likely that what explains the underrepresentation of women in Israel is not just about gender, but about the ways gender intersects with minority status to exclude minority women from political representation altogether.

Certainly, these examples are not definitive. I do not mean to imply that we can just look at the breakdown of seats in a national legislature and know immediately why inequalities in electoral representation take a certain shape. What I hope to show instead is that within-group differences in the political representation of women can be meaningful; if we acknowledge these differences, we might generate different explanations for cross-national variation in women's political representation than we would otherwise. In methodological terms, we want to avoid the potential aggregation bias that might arise from treating women as a monolithic group.

If we take seriously, then, that minority women's legislative representation is an important topic for social scientists to pursue, we must next consider the potential obstacles. I begin with issues involving group identification and selection.

Who are the minorities? Identifying salient divisions across diverse societies

A first challenge to research on minority women across countries is determining which groups should count as "minorities" in a given society. One clear obstacle is simply the magnitude of diversity that exists across the world. During the early 1990s, Fearon (2003) identified more than 822 distinct ethnic groups making up at least 1 percent of the population across 160 countries. The racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic composition of societies also differs widely from one country to the next, even for neighboring states. Given this diversity, it should come as no surprise that sources of data on minority groups disagree, focusing on different social cleavages and aggregating data in different ways.

Even if scholars could agree on an exhaustive list of distinct racial, ethno-linguistic, and religious groups that captures the diversity of populations across coun-

tries, not all social cleavages are equally relevant across time and space. In broad terms, some societies are largely organized along linguistic lines, while in other countries the most salient divisions are religious. In most countries, several axes of disadvantage contribute to the social and political marginalization of individuals. In a single country, marginalized groups could include indigenous peoples, racial minorities, as well as the descendants of specific immigrant populations.

Within these broad categorical distinctions, dynamic contextual factors determine which groups are considered “minorities.” For example, across much of the West, ethnic minority status is determined, in part, by patterns of immigration and the historical relationships between countries of residence and countries of origin (Bird 2005). The salience of ethnic and religious divisions also changes significantly across time. For instance, although Irish Catholic immigrants faced widespread discrimination in the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contemporary research often includes the descendants of Irish Catholic immigrants as part of the English-speaking, Christian, Caucasian majority. Overall, conceptualizations of ethnicity remain rooted to specific geographic and historical contexts (Bird 2005).

A further problem of identifying “minorities” is that group size does not necessarily translate to group advantage or marginalization. While most small groups can be considered “minorities,” some small groups are socially, economically, and politically dominant. Two well-known historical examples include whites of European descent in South Africa and Sunni Muslims in Iraq. In some countries, no single group constitutes a majority. If groups are equally sized, majority/minority dynamics can be even more difficult to determine.

In sum, identifying contextually sensitive social divisions across societies poses numerous challenges. Yet, overcoming obstacles to group selection is both necessary and possible. To demonstrate, I examine the case of Lebanon.

Who are the minorities in Lebanon?

Lebanon is politically organized along religious and sectarian lines under a system called confessionalism. Following the provisions of the Taif Agreement, which was negotiated to end decades of civil war in Lebanon, Christians and Muslims are each entitled to 50 percent of seats in the country’s National Assembly. Christian and Muslim sects also share political leadership.⁴ In addition to these three sects, the government officially recognizes 15 other religious sects – 11 Christian, three Muslim, and one Jewish – ranging from less than 1 percent to 6 percent to of the population. Both absolute and relative size of Lebanon’s religious groups is widely disputed; due to political sensitivities, a national census has not been conducted since 1932, prior to Lebanese independence.

Maronite Christians, estimated to be the third largest sect in Lebanon, have historically been politically dominant. France separated Lebanon from Syria in part to create a state in the Middle East with a dominant Christian majority, and Lebanon continues to have the largest population of Christians in the region. During French administration of Lebanon in the early twentieth century, Maronite

Christians were allocated the majority of political positions, including the presidency and command over the military. Following the Taif Agreement, some of the political power afforded to Maronite Christians during French colonialism was shifted to Muslims. But Maronites continue to benefit from the constitutionally guaranteed division of political positions.

Different Muslim sects have distinct political histories in Lebanon. During French colonization and the transition to nationhood, Sunni Muslims – the second largest sect in Lebanon – actively fought for resources and patronage. Thus, historically, leaders from the Maronite Christian and Sunni Muslim sects together formed the central governing structure of the country (Ajami 1986). Shiite Muslims are numerically the largest of Lebanese religious sects, but historically, they have been marginalized (Corstange 2007). Although Shiite Muslims fought for and gained greater representation over time, power-sharing in Lebanon today still reflects many of the social and institutional inequalities of yesterday.

Several distinct ethnic groups are also present in Lebanon, including Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Jews, Kurds, and Persians, but these groups are largely positioned based on religion, rather than ethnicity. For example, Kurds in Lebanon are identified almost exclusively as Sunni Muslims. One exception to the dominance of sectarian divisions in Lebanon involves the Palestinian refugee population. In 2005, the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) registered over 400,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, approximately 10 percent of the country's population. The vast majority of Palestinian refugees are Sunni Muslim, but they are denied citizenship and face numerous social and economic restrictions.

Historical context is our best guide to identifying the “minorities” in Lebanon. Without reference to sect, Muslims make up a majority of the country and Christians are the minority. With reference to sect, no single group constitutes a majority. Large sects such as the Maronites, Sunnis and Shi'a could be considered the majority, while smaller sects like the Druze and Protestants the minority. Once accounting for Lebanon's history, neither of these initial options seems acceptable. Instead, Maronite Christians and non-Palestinian Sunni Muslims appear to be the dominant groups, while all other religious sects, as well as Palestinian Sunni Muslims, could be classified as “minorities.”

Table 4.1 presents population estimates and political representation by religious group and by gender for Lebanon's 2005 National Assembly.⁵ Maronite Christians held the greatest share of seats of any sect in the National Assembly, while Shia and Sunni groups each held slightly fewer. Overall, therefore, Shiite Muslims were underrepresented compared to their share of the population, while Sunnis and Maronite Christians were both slightly overrepresented. Some religious sects received no representation at all. Only 11 of the 18 officially recognized sects in Lebanon were elected to the National Assembly in 2005.

In Lebanon, religion interacts with the power structure to shape the demand for women from different sects. Only six women, 4.7 percent of seats, were elected to Lebanon's National Assembly in 2005 and all of them were members of historically dominant groups: four were Maronite Christians, and two were Sunni Muslims. The consistent exclusion of Shiite women from political power suggests

Table 4.1 Unofficial population estimates and 2005 election results for Lebanon’s Chamber of Deputies by religious sect and gender

| <i>Muslim</i> | <i>Population</i> | <i>Legislative</i> | <i>Group Seats by Sex</i> | |
|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------|
| | | <i>Seats</i> | <i>Men</i> | <i>Women</i> |
| Sunni Islam | 25–30% | 21% | 93% | 7% |
| Shi’a Islam | 41–49% | 21% | 100% | 0% |
| Other Muslim | 4–7% | 8% | 100% | 0% |
| <i>Christian</i> | | | | |
| Maronite Christian | 16–25% | 27% | 88% | 17% |
| Other Christian | 9–12% | 23% | 100% | 0% |

Note: Since no official data on the religious composition of Lebanon has been collected since 1932, these numbers reflect the range of unofficial estimates from the CIA and the World Bank, supplemented by additional sources.

that multiple forces of marginalization interact.⁶ Disaggregating the category of “woman” thus provides new, meaningful information about the obstacles to political empowerment that women must overcome.

Methodologically, we are still left with problems of cross-national comparability. In the next section, I make a case that comparative intersectional research is both possible and useful.

Intersectionality in a cross-national framework

To date, research on marginalized women’s representation in electoral politics has largely been limited to studies in the United States and other Western industrialized countries (Takash 1993; Black 2000, Smooth 2001; Scola 2006). Existing research also often focuses on a single group, such as black women, Latinas, or Native American women (e.g. Simien 2006; Smooth 2006; Fraga et al. 2005; Prindeville and Bretting 1998). Much of this research delves into the complexities of minority women’s identities and lived experiences. Given these complexities, it is reasonable to ask whether minority women’s political experiences are comparable across countries and across different types of marginalized groups. For instance, could studying Arab women in Israel have anything to teach us about the experiences of Kurdish women in Turkey or Hindu women in Bangladesh?

In the terminology of cross-national methodology, we face the classic problem of functional equivalence (Przeworski and Teune 1970); in this case we need to measure “minority” as an intersectional concept across different countries and times. Two approaches to this problem are evident. We could focus on one type of marginalized group, regardless of differences in salience of group identity across countries, e.g. only women from religious minorities. Or, we can consider salience, which might lead us to focus on religious minorities in one country, linguistic minorities in another country, and a mix of both in a third country. Though both approaches have their merits, cross-national research that includes a range of marginalized groups is especially useful for research on the institutional underpinnings

of political inequalities. The cases of Bangladesh, Romania, and Burundi show the potential benefits of this approach to cross-national intersectional research.

Comparing gender and ethnic/religious quotas in Bangladesh, Romania, and Burundi

Overall, Bangladesh, Romania, and Burundi appear to have little in common. Located on separate continents, Bangladesh, Romania, and Burundi range widely in population size and demographic composition. The majority of Bangladeshi citizens are Sunni Muslims, most Romanians are Christian Orthodox, and in Burundi, Catholicism is the dominant religion. Romania's economy, though battling corruption and disinflation, has a GDP per capita three times higher than Bangladesh and more than 13 times higher than Burundi (CIA Factbook 2007).

Politically, Bangladesh, Romania, and Burundi could not be more different. Following decades of communist rule, Romania today is a relatively stable democracy with close ties to the West, joining both NATO and the EU in recent years. Bangladesh, via coups and martial law, has experienced only interrupted periods of democratic rule. It can be worse: Burundi's first democratically elected president was assassinated in the early 1990s, resulting in a 12-year civil war fought along ethnic lines. After international parties helped to negotiate a ceasefire in 2003, Burundi held regular elections in 2005.

During the mid 2000s, Bangladesh, Romania, and Burundi used different institutional rules to govern the political incorporation of women. As Table 4.2 summarizes, all three countries had rules facilitating women's inclusion in one form or another. Bangladesh and Burundi both required a certain percentage of parliamentary seats to women at the national level: 13 percent in Bangladesh and 30 percent in Burundi. Romania, alternatively, adopted a weak national gender quota in 2004 that required candidate lists for parliamentary elections include both male and female candidates (IDEA 2007). In the same year, the largest political coalition in

Table 4.2 Gender and ethnic/religious quotas in Bangladesh, Romania, and Burundi

| <i>Country</i> | <i>Gender Quotas</i> | <i>% Women in Parliament</i> | <i>Ethnic / Religious Quotas</i> | <i>% Minorities in Parliament</i> |
|----------------|---|------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| Bangladesh | national: 13% reserved seats | 15% | None | 3% |
| Romania | national but no mandated threshold; dominant party has 30% quota | 11% | Ethnic minority parties not reaching 5% vote threshold still afforded representation | 12% |
| Burundi | women 1 of every 5 names on party lists; co-optation ensures women are 30% of total seats | 31% | Mandated division of seats by ethnicity: 60–40%, except 3 reserved seats for indigenous minority | 42% |

Romania, the Social Democrats, began requiring that at least 30 percent of its candidates be women. Across the three countries, women’s political representation was the highest in Burundi (31 percent), followed by Bangladesh (15 percent), and then Romania (11 percent).

What Bangladesh, Romania, and Burundi have in common is a similar majority/minority structure: all three countries have a religious or ethnic majority group that makes up 80–90 percent of the country’s population (Muslim Bengalis, ethnic Romanians, and Hutus), a significantly sized minority group that makes up at least 5 percent of the population (Hindu Bengalis, ethnic Hungarians, and Tutsis), and one or more smaller minority groups. However, for 2005 and 2004 elections, only Burundi and Romania had formal rules requiring the representation of minority groups. Burundi mandated a 60 percent–40 percent Hutu–Tutsi split, in addition to reserving three seats for the Twa, or pygmies. All political parties competed for 101 seats, but following the elections 18 additional members were co-opted to ensure that the quotas were met. In Romania, if a minority ethnic group’s political organization did not receive 5 percent of votes, the threshold required to earn seats outright, the ethnic group was still afforded a representative in parliament. Bangladesh, by contrast, used no formal mechanisms to facilitate the representation of minority groups.

How did these policies impact the political representation of minority women? Table 4.3 presents data on the principal religious and ethnic cleavages in Bangladesh, Romania, and Burundi, sorted by population size, along with data on political representation broken down by group and sex. To begin, in Bangladesh, Hindus were significantly underrepresented compared to their share of the population. Whereas approximately 16 percent of Bengalis are Hindu, they held only 2 percent of seats. When Bangladesh adopted a quota to increase women’s

Table 4.3 Population estimates and political representation by ethnic or religious group and by gender for Bangladesh, Romania, and Burundi, 2004–2005

| <i>Bangladesh</i> | <i>Population</i> | <i>Legislative</i> | <i>Gender</i> | |
|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------|--------------|
| | | <i>Seats</i> | <i>Men</i> | <i>Women</i> |
| Muslim | 82% | 97% | 85% | 15% |
| Hindu | 16% | 2% | 100% | 0% |
| Other Groups | 2% | 1% | 100% | 0% |
| <i>Romania</i> | <i>Population</i> | <i>Seats</i> | <i>Men</i> | <i>Women</i> |
| Romanian | 89% | 88% | 88% | 12% |
| Hungarian | 7% | 7% | 100% | 0% |
| Roma | 2% | 0.3% | 100% | 0% |
| Other Groups | 2% | 5% | 88% | 12% |
| <i>Burundi</i> | <i>Population</i> | <i>Seats</i> | <i>Men</i> | <i>Women</i> |
| Hutu | 85% | 58% | 77% | 23% |
| Tutsi | 14% | 39% | 57% | 43% |
| Twa | 1% | 3% | 67% | 33% |

numbers, Hindu women did not benefit from the measure. The case of Bangladesh suggests that the adoption of gender quotas in absence of policies regulating ethnic and religious differences may contribute to the exclusion of minority women. In countries like Bangladesh, parties have few incentives to recruit minority women candidates.

Romania, unlike Bangladesh, adopted policies to facilitate the political representation of both women and minorities. But these rules combined in ways that did not advance the political representation of minority women. The Hungarian minority is politically organized as the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) and in 2005, the party reached the 5 percent threshold required to achieve representation in the legislature. In the absence of a national-level gender quota that stipulates list position, however, UDMR included no women in winnable positions on its party list: of the 22 seats occupied by the Hungarian minority, not a single seat was held by a woman. Unlike the Hungarian minority, the Social Democratic Roma Party did not reach the 5 percent threshold. Since the Roma make up about 2.5 percent of the population, the provision of a single seat means that the Roma were underrepresented, and the single Roma seat was occupied by a man. Seventeen other smaller ethnic groups entered the Romanian national legislature through the same rule exemption as the Roma, each afforded a single seat and producing political overrepresentation of these small ethnic groups relative to their population share. Just two of these 17 ethnic minority parties elected a woman. Overall, the combination of gender and ethnic provisions in Romania did not advance minority women's political representation.

Like Romania, Burundi regulated the political representation of women and ethnic groups. Unlike Romania, however, Burundi balanced both gender and ethnicity through the same mechanism: co-opting seats. Because a Tutsi woman can help fulfill the 40 percent ethnic and 30 percent gender requirements, the combination of ethnic and gender quotas has increased Tutsi women's political numbers. In fact, of the female members of Burundi's National Assembly, 54% were Tutsi. Moreover, of the 18 co-opted positions, half were Tutsi women. Moreover, of the 18 co-opted positions, half are Tutsi women. In Burundi, minority women's dual identities (as both women and members of minority ethnic groups) benefit them politically. But, this duality also benefits majority men: if parties had instead satisfied the quota by including Tutsi men and Hutu women, Hutu men's share of seats would necessarily decline. Mathematically, including more minority women allows majority men to hold on to a greater share of seats in the legislature. Overall, then, it appears to be institutional configurations (and not women's high labor force participation rates) that explains the political success of ethnic minority women in Burundi.

Comparing the effects of different policies regarding the political incorporation of women and minority groups improves our understanding of intersectionality. Bangladesh and Romania both demonstrate that the different logics and structures of gender and ethnic quotas can leave minority women behind. Burundi shows that at least in some contexts, occupying more than one marginalized group can sometimes provide minority women with strategic advantages.

Even if we are able to identify disadvantaged groups across countries and

accept that obstacles to comparison can and should be overcome, another challenge remains: measurement.

Proof

The measurement challenges of capturing intersectional variation

Measuring the political incorporation of women from marginalized groups is far from straightforward. Unlike studying women, who make up a fairly consistent share of the population across countries, the size of minority female populations worldwide varies considerably. Further, analyzing groups at the intersection of gender and minority status allows for measures that highlight differences across groups of women or between men and women from the same group. With each analysis the researcher must decide whether to assess minority women's legislative representation relative to their population share or to the political representation of minority men or majority women.

For academics, government agencies, and nongovernmental organizations, women's share of seats in the national legislature, i.e. the "percentage of women in parliament," is the most popular cross-national measure of women's political status (Hughes 2013a). This measure of all women tells us nothing about how minority women fare in politics. One way to understand where minority women fit into the picture is to subdivide women's legislative representation by majority/minority status (e.g. Black and Lakhani 1997). Minority women's share of total legislative seats tackles a fundamental question: in a given country, are minority women politically represented at all?

Minority women's share of all seats is less useful if we want to draw comparisons between majority and minority women, two groups with very different shares of the population. An alternative measure, then, is women's representation as a share of their group's seats in the legislature. Although explicitly a measure of women's success relative to men's, these statistics are usually employed to compare electoral outcomes across groups of women (e.g. Darcy and Hadley 1988; Scola 2006). However, measures of women's success relative to men may be less informative for groups that comprise only a small fraction of a country's population. For small groups, relative measures are typically unstable as the election of even one woman (or man) can drastically change the measure. Assessing relative performance also completely ignores those groups that are unrepresented, even if they are sizeable minorities.

Although women's share of group seats can be useful for making comparisons, the measure still does not directly account for differences in group size within or across countries. To explicitly account for population size, researchers have designed a wide variety of measures to assess how proportionally seats in a legislative body are distributed (Benoit 2000). Proportionality indices most often treat political parties as the groups of interest (e.g. Gallagher 1991; Loosemore and Hanby 1971), but they have also been used to gauge the political representation of ethnic minorities across countries (Ruedin 2009). Proportionality indices are agnostic about the origins of disproportionality. That is, increasing

the representation of minority groups beyond their population share creates disproportionality in the same way as does the overrepresentation of majority groups.

A fourth approach, then, is to weigh the legislative representation of minority women against their share of the population—a direct assessment of how proportionally minority women are represented. Although not particularly useful for comparisons between minority women and majority women or minority women, such measures are likely an important place to start for researchers hoping to explain variation in minority women’s political success worldwide.

Using more than one measure is typically necessary. Take the case of Cyprus, for instance, where the underrepresentation of Turkish Cypriot women is a function of the withdrawal of the entire community from institutions of central government in the 1960s; all ethnic Turks – both men and women – lack representation in Cyprus’s national legislature. In countries like Cyprus, the lack of minority women representatives in absolute numbers is partially informative; yet, it is also important to know that minority men are unrepresented.

A final consideration for the measurement of minority women in politics is the diversity within the “minority women” group. For example, following 2004 elections in Panama, Afro-Panamanians were excluded from politics entirely, whereas indigenous groups (who represent a smaller share of the population than Afro-Panamanians) were represented in the national legislature but only by men. To avoid aggregation bias, it may be necessary to measure minority women’s political representation at the group level rather than the country level. As with all measurements of cross-national intersectionality, there are tradeoffs between presenting complexity and being able to make sense of the information.

Conclusion

Investigating politics at the intersection of gender and minority status across countries faces many challenges, and researchers are only beginning to consider how the intersecting identities of minority women influence their legislative representation across different contexts. Identifying relevant and comparable social divisions and tackling problems of measurement are main barriers that researchers must cross to study minority women across countries. In this chapter, I show that these complications can be, and should be, addressed.

First, I argued that by taking contextual factors into account, it is possible to identify salient social divisions across societies and to define a set of disadvantaged or “minority” groups. The case of Lebanon shows that numerical size is not necessarily the best way to determine minority status. Instead, researching historical and contemporary social and political inequalities across countries informs how to interpret the representation of women from different ethnic or religious groups.

A second problem involves comparability across countries. Yet, I contend that intersectionality research stands to benefit from drawing comparisons across

countries. Exploring institutional differences across Bangladesh, Romania, and Burundi – countries with vastly different social, economic, and political contexts – I showed that it is not just possible, but useful, to study minority women’s political representation across countries. Specifically, I showed how certain institutional configurations can exclude minority women, while others can provide minority women with strategic advantages.

Measurement provides another obstacle to the analysis of minority women’s political representation. Measures of minority women’s representation relative to minority men, majority women, or to their population share each serve a purpose. But, it is especially in combination with one another that we can understand the larger story of political inequality in a given country.

The importance of intersectional research on political inequality goes beyond explaining variation in the political outcomes of minority women. Even for political inequality researchers who are not particularly interested in the outcomes or impacts of minority women, intersectional research reminds scholars to be wary of aggregation bias. Understanding differences within groups may be the key to explaining broader variation in political inequalities across time and place.

In all, this research suggests that despite many obstacles, cross-national research on minority women’s political representation can and should move forward. Acknowledging differences among women may be a difficult step for cross-national research on legislative diversity, but it is an important one.

Notes

- 1 I thank Pamela Paxton for her comments on earlier drafts of this chapter. I also gratefully acknowledge the support of the National Science Foundation, P.E.O. International, and the Coca-Cola Critical Difference for Women Program at The Ohio State University. To contact author: Melanie M. Hughes, Department of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh, 2405 WWPB, 230 S. Bouquet St., Pittsburgh, PA 15260; hughesm@pitt.edu.
- 2 In this study, I apply the term “minority” to describe racial, ethnic, and religious groups that face social, economic, and/or political marginalization, either by law or by custom. Small groups that are politically dominant are not included here as “minorities,” regardless of their group’s size. I also limit my analysis to race, ethnicity and religion, excluding disadvantage by other axes such as sexuality and disability.
- 3 Identifying the Tutsis as a marginalized minority group is questionable. Even though Tutsis have always been a numerical minority in Burundi, they held economic, political and military power in the decades after Burundi’s independence. However, since democratization in 1993, Hutu political parties and candidates have dominated every multi-party election. Although both Hutus and Tutsis see themselves as marginalized (MRGI 2008), political power has rested squarely in Hutu hands in recent years.
- 4 After 2005 elections, for example, the President was Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister was Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of the National Assembly was Shiite Muslim (US Department of State 2007).
- 5 Because no official demographic data has been collected in Lebanon since 1932, I report the range of population estimates identified by different sources.
- 6 Notably, one Greek Orthodox woman did win a seat in the 2009 parliamentary elections. Two Maronite Christian women and one Sunni Muslim woman were also elected. But none of the 27 Shiite representatives were women.

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