

How Women's Political Power Can Strengthen Human Security

Women's representation in the Philippines drives an increased focus on the needs of the marginalized, says Maria Rachel J. Arenas

Maria Rachel J. Arenas lives up to the adage that women's rights are human rights. In her first stint in the Philippines House of Representatives in 2007, she pushed for the passage of the Magna Carta of Women, a landmark piece of legislation that outlawed discrimination against women and assured them of equal treatment under the law.

Since returning to the House two years ago after chairing the country's Movie and Television Review and Classification Board, Arenas says she considers herself more of a social worker than a politician, focusing on constituency work and strengthening the education system. "We have to make sure that our constituents get the best of the basic services they deserve," she says.



Maria Rachel J. Arenas

MP, the House of Representatives,
The Philippines;
WPL Ambassador

We recently interviewed her for a report by the Oliver Wyman Forum, Women Political Leaders (WPL), and the World Bank's *Women, Business and the Law* on the positive impact of having more women in political offices.

You helped enact the Magna Carta of Women law targeting discrimination against women, supported legislation to prevent bullying in schools, and co-authored amendments to legislation against human trafficking. Why are these policies so important, and what impacts do you observe as a result of them?

My core mission as a legislator is to strengthen the country's human security. The laws you mentioned reflect a deliberate effort to create a society where every individual, especially the marginalized and vulnerable, is protected, empowered, and allowed to thrive.

When I first entered Congress, I was aware of the systemic challenges women in our country face, ranging from discrimination, violence, and underrepresentation in decision-making roles. The Magna Carta of Women has been transformative. Since its enactment, we have seen a significant increase in women's participation in leadership roles. There's also now a balanced representation of women and men in local judiciaries and in local government.

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My advocacy for the Anti-Bullying Act of 2013 stemmed from a deep-seated concern for the welfare and development of our children. I believe that a child’s right to a safe and supportive learning environment is fundamental to their growth and future success.

Human trafficking is a grave violation of human rights and dignity, often described as “modern-day slavery.” It is an issue that cuts deep into the fabric of our society, exploiting our most vulnerable — women, children, and the impoverished. The impact of this law is evident in the steady decrease in reported trafficking cases, a testament to increased public awareness and the tireless work of both governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Why are there more women in office now? Did the law encourage them to run or were other factors at play?

There are more women legislators not only because of the Magna Carta of Women. In the Philippines, we really look up to our mothers. It’s a matriarchal society where even if the mother stays home, they are seen as the decision-maker of the family. And I believe the training and the values that are carried on by the children of these women have put them in a position where they can make a difference.

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I started in 2007 as the first woman representative in the province of Pangasinan, but I prepared for years. I took my master's, and I campaigned for two years because I felt that, being a woman, I had to prove myself. I faced a lot of challenges like political violence, corruption, and other things. My mayor, one of my strongest allies, was shot beside me. But that didn't stop us from showing people that we were not scared, that we were there to fight for the marginalized, for the vulnerable, to give them a better future.

The increase of women in office in the Philippines is driven by several factors. While laws like the Magna Carta of Women promote gender equality, there's no specific legal mandate for women to run. Key drivers include positive cultural perceptions of women leaders and advocacy efforts encouraging their participation. Additionally, frustration with traditional politics has made voters more open to female leaders, along with higher education levels, professional achievements, and service track records. Overall, it's a mix of cultural, social, and institutional factors.

Does the growing number of women in office, and younger women, have an impact on the types of legislation being proposed and adopted?

Yes, the growing number of women, especially younger women, in Philippine politics has impacted the types of legislation being proposed. These women often prioritize issues like gender equality, healthcare, education, and social welfare, reflecting their focus on inclusive policies. They also push for laws addressing women's rights, such as anti-violence measures and reproductive health, alongside advocacy for climate action and youth empowerment. Their presence brings fresh perspectives, moving away from traditional politics and promoting more progressive, people-centered legislation. Through legislation, we have funded programs that cater to the marginalized.

What new priorities do you have on your plate right now?

I'm preparing for reelection in 2025. I want to continue the transformative work my mother (Deputy House Speaker Rose Marie Arenas) and I have begun. My mother and grandmother taught me that prioritizing the needs of others above self no matter the personal cost is the true essence of public service.