

Promoting the political participation of women in the European Union

Policy Brief

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Introduction

Gender equality is a core value, a fundamental right, and a principled commitment of the EU. As a core value, it is embedded in the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU as follows: ***“In all its activities, the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality, between men and women.” (Article 8).***

The treaty provision is the basis for the promotion of equality between women and men. It is addressed in multiple ways, including through successive gender equality strategic plans.

The *Gender Equality Strategy 2020-25*¹ aims at ‘achieving a gender equal Europe where gender-based violence, sex discrimination and structural inequality between women and men are a thing of the past’.

The Strategy is implemented through i) targeted actions and ii) mainstreaming a gender perspective at all stages of policy design in all EU policy areas. It is attentive to the way in which gender intersects with other personal and social identities to compound discrimination.

This Gender Equality Strategy seeks to bring about ‘A Europe where women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, are equal.’

One area of focus is on equal participation in, and leadership of, society. For politics, this means promoting and encouraging the participation of women as voters and candidates in the 2024 European elections. Leadership in economic life is also given attention, with the intention to adopt EU-wide targets for gender balance on corporate boards.

State of Play in relation to women’s participation in politics

Although 40% of European Parliament members (MEPs) are women, and European Commissioner roles are equally shared between women and men, at national, local and regional level there is still much work to be done to bring about gender equality.

On average², women constitute

- 33% of Member State parliaments
- 33% of Government Ministers
- 34% of Local Government members

¹https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/aid_development_cooperation_fundamental_rights/gender_equality_strategy_factsheet_en.pdf [accessed 20 March 2021]

² https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/browse/wmidm/wmidm_pol [accessed 20 March 2021]

- 22% of Political Party leaders [women=34: men=124].
- 22% of Prime Ministers/Executive Presidents [women=6: men=21]
- 17% of Mayors/local government leaders

Initiatives that appear to have made a difference

Over the last two decades, a great deal of effort has gone into increasing women's participation in politics and decision-making.

Candidate gender quota laws are in place in 10 EU Member States, and in 8 other European countries³. These laws usually require that at least 30% of candidates for national parliamentary elections are women, with a 40% minimum most common. In France and Belgium, the quota is 50%. In countries with legislated quotas, women's share of parliamentary seats has increased from 18% in 2004 to 34% today.

Denmark (40% female MPs), Finland (46% female MPs), Sweden (47% female MPs) and the European Economic Area country of Norway (44% female MPs) deliver gender-balanced parliaments without the need for quota laws.⁴ This can be explained by the culture of gender equality embedded in their societies, and the acceptance by political parties of the norm of gender equality for many decades. Electoral practices such as alternating women and men on party electoral lists also aids in gender balancing political representation.

Other countries with gender-balanced parliaments are Spain, Belgium, France and Portugal. National gender quota laws have aided these countries obtain gender-balanced parliamentary representation. In the case of Austria, party adherence to this norm delivers a gender-balanced parliament.

The gender quota laws are supported by measures and activities that stimulate women's interest in taking part in politics. These measures include media and publicity campaigns promoting the need for more women in politics (such as the *Power2Her* local government campaign⁵), training for potential women candidates (such as *Women for Election*⁶, and the *GEPL Project*⁷), and reports on gender equality in the electoral and political systems (such as the European Parliament study on candidate procedures⁸), among others. Governments, women's organisations, political parties, and gender experts have been involved in these activities.

National measures complement and reinforce pan-EU efforts. These include a wide variety of organized training in electoral campaigns for women seeking to develop a political career; non-governmental organization advocacy for women's right to stand for election; and training in

³ <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/database> [accessed 22 March 2021]

⁴ <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=1&year=2021> [accessed 22 March 2021]

⁵ <https://charter-equality.eu/news/power2her-our-campaign-for-womens-political-empowerment.html> [accessed 20 March 2021]

⁶ <https://womenforelection.ie/training-events/> [accessed 20 March 2021]

⁷ <https://gepleproject.eu/> [accessed 20 March 2021]

⁸ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2015/519206/IPOL_STU%282015%29519206_EN.pdf [accessed 20 March 2021]

gender impact assessments for senior decision-makers to address structural gender bias. Some examples:

Germany: the cross-party Helene Weber-College⁹ aims to have more women in parliaments. It holds summer schools, empowerment programmes and awards a government-sponsored prize for outstanding female local government politicians;

Finland: Training in gender impact assessments by the City of Vantaa administration for its staff¹⁰;

Malta: Initiatives in the Maltese Labour Party to increase women's political representation¹¹;

Netherlands: Women's groups advocate for women's right to stand for election¹²;

Portugal: *From Woman to Woman*: Encouraging young women to participate in politics¹³

These, and many more examples of good practices can be found on the European Institute for Gender Equality website.

Strengthening democracy and eliminating the democratic deficit

Many initiatives – such as the examples above - have focused on empowering women to participate in public life, and to tackling the structural gender imbalances in political decision-making. There is now a renewed focus on strengthening democracy through tackling deep-seated attitudinal bias in society and politics. Here are some examples:

France: The *Calvez Report*¹⁴ (2020) on women in the media makes 26 recommendations to increase and strengthen equality between women and men in the media;

Sweden: The *Politician's Safety Survey* measures the extent and consequences of harassment, threats and violence against elected representatives. This includes online sexual harassment and abuse of female representatives. In 2020 it undertook an information campaign against cyber harassment, connected to participation and involvement in the democratic society¹⁵

Spain: The *Women's Participation Council*, established in 2007, advises the Spanish government on policy matters;¹⁶

⁹ <https://www.frauen-macht-politik.de/en/helene-weber-college/the-helene-weber-college/> [accessed 21 March 2021]

¹⁰ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/good-practices/finland/training-gender-impact-assessments> [accessed 21 March 2021]

¹¹ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/good-practices/malta/party-strategy-increase-womens-political-representation> [accessed 21 March 2021]

¹² <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/good-practices/netherlands/advocacy-right-stand-election> [accessed 21 March 2021]

¹³ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/good-practices/portugal/bringing-young-women-politics-project-woman-woman> [accessed 21 March 2021]

¹⁴ <http://traduction.culture.gouv.fr/url/Result.aspx?to=en&url=https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Espace-documentation/Rapports/Rapport-sur-la-place-des-femmes-dans-les-medias-en-temps-de-crise> [accessed 21 March 2021]

¹⁵ <https://www.bra.se/bra-in-english/home/publications/archive/publications/2019-11-13-the-politicians-safety-survey.html> [accessed 21 March 2021]

¹⁶ <https://www.inmujer.gob.es/en/elInstituto/consejomujer/home.htm> [accessed 21 March 2021]

Germany: *DaMigra* – umbrella organisation of women’s migrant associations, promotes migrant women’s viewpoints to government, supports migrant women access services and employment¹⁷

Ireland: *Citizens’ Assembly on gender equality* - a deliberative forum of 100 citizens established by government to make recommendations on constitutional and policy reforms in this area¹⁸

European Parliament: Study on the backlash against the rights of women and girls in the EU¹⁹

European Women’s Lobby: Campaigns for parity democracy and a feminist Europe²⁰

European Commission: European Democracy Action Plan includes measures to engage citizens more fully in public decision-making through deliberative forums.²¹

These national and European-wide initiatives (and others) contribute to the ambition of a European society ‘Where they [women and men] are **free** to pursue their chosen path in life, where they have equal opportunities to **thrive**, and where they can equally participate in and **lead** our European society’ (Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025).

What can we learn from the European experience:

Reflecting on the wealth of experience, initiatives and assessments in Europe, one can draw the following recommendations as to the effective measures for engaging all citizens more closely with democratic processes, and promoting gender equality:

1. Include a commitment to gender equality in the Constitution, supported by a vision of what that commitment means
2. Strengthen existing, and introduce new, gender equality laws and measures, eg quotas, electoral laws, women’s representation in the media, combatting online sexual abuse and harassment
3. Take care of the pipeline: promote women’s participation in regional and local government
4. Empower and include women’s NGOs; include intersectional voices, such as organisations representing the perspectives of minority women, migrant women, transgender persons
5. Political parties to review their candidate recruitment and selection practices to ensure gender equality; and give women the support and resourcing they need to win office
6. Parliament to drive change through monitoring government actions, and opening deliberative spaces for dialogue between women and elected representatives.

End.

¹⁷ <https://www.damigra.de/about-us/> [accessed 21 March 2021]

¹⁸ <https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/> [accessed 21 March 2021]

¹⁹ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604955/IPOL_STU\(2018\)604955_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604955/IPOL_STU(2018)604955_EN.pdf) [accessed 21 March 2021]

²⁰ <https://womenlobby.org/-Women-in-Politics-507-?lang=en> [accessed 21 March 2021]

²¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/edap_communication.pdf [accessed 21 March 2021]

