



Community  
of Democracies



# Advancing Women's Political Participation

European Consultation on Gender Equality  
& Political Empowerment

# Background Information

Even though gender equality and women's empowerment are currently at the heart of the global agenda, the road ahead is still long and challenging. While international human rights mechanisms provide a valid framework to advance the protection of women and to reduce the gaps for inequality, more efforts are needed. The realm of politics has been considered as one of the most challenging spheres of the public life for women to enter and their participation in parliament is crucial for fair representation of women in society.

In this light, it is only timely to focus on an alternative policy agenda to address the root causes of inequality, including looking at the intersectionality of multiple inequalities and processes of discrimination. In addition, it is fundamental that the efforts and the core instruments from the regional organizations, including conventions, resolutions, legal instruments and programmatic agendas move beyond the identification of the causes and impediments towards the achievement of gender equality, but to the design and systematic implementation of gender responsive measures/mechanisms to guarantee equality and prevent gender based discrimination.

The Community of Democracies, from the moment of its inception in 2000, has been actively supporting activities and projects dedicated to women's empowerment and gender equality. The Warsaw Declaration, the founding document of the Community of Democracies, underlines that "Informed participation by all elements of society, men and women, in a country's economic and political life, including by persons belonging to minority groups, is fundamental to a vibrant and durable democracy." Democracy should transform power relations between men and women in such a manner that gender equality is promoted in terms of inclusiveness, participation, representativeness and accountability of democratic processes and institutions. The universal principle of equality and non-discrimination between women and men forms one of the major global commitments in the pursuit of gender equality in democracy building.

To support women's participation in politics, the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies (PSCD) implemented the project on "Advancing Women's Political Participation", funded by the Republic of Korea and organized in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and International IDEA. Through dialogue, the project provided an opportunity for participants from all over the world to discuss and compare the challenges and successes that women face in politics and look for ways to propel the idea of women's political participation forward. It consisted of five regional consultations organized in 2016-2017 in Strasbourg (France), Johannesburg (South Africa), Tunis (Tunisia), Bali (Indonesia) and Mexico City (Mexico).

The Regional Consultations on Gender Equality and Political Empowerment of Women served as platforms created to enhance a multilateral dialogue regarding the challenges and opportunities in the implementation of the legal frameworks, as well as the exchange of best practices to take specific actions to address the main issues related to the advancement of Gender Equality and the Political Participation of Women.

The project aims to produce a global and regional policy recommendations and contribute to the policy guidebook based on input collected from the five regional consultations. The guidebook is a part of the Inter-Regional Dialogue on Democracy (IRDD) and provides recommendations on how to efficiently advance women's political participation.

# Introduction

The European Consultation brought together practicing politicians, representatives of international organizations present in Europe and representatives of civil society organizations to discuss the issue of gender equality and the advancement of women's political participation.

This report consists of three sections of relevant experiences and lessons learned on gender equality and the political empowerment of women: 1) challenges to overcome in the region; 2) existing tools and mechanisms; and 3) best practices and recommendations on how to effectively advance gender equality and women's political participation.

Europe is home to many of the world's most economically developed countries and mature democracies. In terms of gender equality and women's political participation, the countries of Western Europe and Scandinavia are among the world's leaders. However, there is still a great deal of work to be done in achieving true gender parity in the European region.

The Global Gender Gap Index, which measures progress on gender equality in economic participation, education, political participation and health, reveals that substantial improvements are needed in all regions of the world, and huge differences in the opportunities for women, in the best and worst performing countries, remain. At a global level, only two regions – Western Europe and North America – have a remaining gender gap of less than 30%, at 25% and 28%, respectively. The top 10 positions in the Index are dominated by European countries (Nordic nations in particular): Iceland (1), Finland (2), Norway (3), Sweden (4), Ireland (6) and Slovenia (8). The top 40 includes many more European countries: Switzerland (11), Germany (13), the Netherlands (16), France (17), Latvia (18), Denmark (19), Great Britain (20), Estonia (22), Belgium (24), Lithuania (25), Spain (29) and Poland (38).

In addition, data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) shows that women hold only 22% of the seats in the world's parliaments today. According to their data on the number of women in parliament, Iceland is the highest ranked country from the European region at fourth (47.6%). There are six other European countries in the top 20 – Sweden (43.6%), Finland (42.0%), Norway (39.6%), Spain (39.1%), Belgium (38.0%) and the Netherlands (38.0%). In addition, Andorra, Austria, Belarus, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Macedonia, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom have attained the 30% female political representation level advised by the Beijing Platform for Action (BPA).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Women in Politics: 2017. Report. Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2017.

Participants at the Consultation were in agreement that democracy without gender equality is only a half-democracy. Furthermore, they called for greater efforts to address the root causes of gender inequality in order to achieve Sustainable Development Goals 5 (on gender equality) and 16 (on peace, justice, and strong institutions). In particular, they emphasized a need to focus on the design and systematic implementation of gender responsive measures to guarantee equality and prevent gender-based discrimination.

# PART I: Challenges to be overcome to advance women's political participation

Participants in the Consultation cited a series of obstacles which impede gender equality and women's political participation in Europe.

**First**, as noted by the representative from the Council of Europe (CoE), the weakening of gender equality mechanisms due to budgetary cuts, along with the economic and financial crisis, has resulted in a social crisis impacting women's economic situation, eroding the progress made in gender equality projects more generally. The economic downturn has also facilitated the rise of populist parties, which have tended to adopt more traditional views on gender roles. Gender pay gaps also affect women's economic independence, with potential implications for ability and willingness to be politically engaged.

**Second**, lack of disaggregated data presents an obstacle for addressing gender discrimination, as emphasized by UN Women during the Consultation. Without gender disaggregated data, assessing and evaluating policy implementation remains a difficult task.

**Third**, political parties and their leaders do not always take an active role in advancing women's political participation, according to female members of parliament who were present at the meeting. While women can vote and be elected in all European countries, women do not have equal opportunities to participate in political decision-making. In the 47 CoE member states, only 23% of ministers are women. Although gender quotas have been widely adopted across the region, political parties vary in their commitment to quota implementation – and more broadly, to encouraging women's active participation within the parties themselves.

**Fourth**, the CoE pointed to a growing tendency towards sexism and hate speech in politics. Women's political participation generates a lot of attention on social media and on the internet in general, where women are trolled or are harassed once they enter politics, very often by their party colleagues. Women are often “mansplained” and disregarded because of their gender. In extreme cases women receive death threats and do not feel safe in the political environment.

All participants agreed that what is missing is the political will to advance women's political participation. Europe has the mechanisms to implement and review women's political participation, but does not fully use them. The recent election of a man as the new Secretary General of the United Nations, despite a long run campaign in favour of a woman and a long list of qualified women as candidates, shows there is a need to put more effort into promoting active participation of women in politics.

## PART II: Existing mechanisms to advance women's political participation

A variety of legal tools and mechanisms exist at the international and regional levels to increase women's political participation.

### International Treaties and Organizations

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly, is an international bill of rights for women and a legally binding instrument obliging states to promote gender equality. At present, there are 189 states parties, making CEDAW an important tool for national and international advocates of gender equality. Article 7 specifically addresses the elimination of gender discrimination in political and public life, stating:

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

- To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;
- To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;
- To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.

In 1997, the CEDAW Committee issued General Recommendation No. 23 to elaborate on Article 7, making a stronger case for “temporary special measures” (for example, gender quotas) to achieve equality of participation. The Recommendation states that the “formal removal of barriers and the introduction of temporary special measures to encourage the equal participation of both men and women in the public life of their societies are essential prerequisites to true equality in political life.” It also notes that states parties, political parties, and public officials should actively encourage women's full and effective participation, together with all other sectors of society.

The Beijing Platform for Action, signed unanimously by all UN member states at the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, lists Women in Power and Decision-Making among its twelve Strategic Objectives. Under this Objective, states commit to take measures to ensure women's equal

access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making, as well as to increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership. Paragraph 190a calls on governments to:

Commit themselves to establishing the goal of gender balance in governmental bodies and committees, as well as in public administrative entities, and in the judiciary, including, inter alia, setting specific targets and implementing measures to substantially increase the number of women with a view to achieving equal representation of women and men, if necessary through positive action, in all governmental and public administration positions.

Paragraph 191, in turns, urges political parties to:

- Consider examining party structures and procedures to remove all barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against the participation of women;
- Consider developing initiatives that allow women to participate fully in all internal policy-making structures and appointive and electoral nominating processes;
- Consider incorporating gender issues in their political agenda, taking measures to ensure that women can participate in the leadership of political parties on an equal basis with men.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, emphasizes the involvement of women in conflict prevention, crisis management, and post-conflict reconstruction. Recognizing “the importance of [women’s] equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security,” Resolution 1325:

1. Urges Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict;
2. Encourages the Secretary-General to implement his strategic plan of action (A/49/587) calling for an increase in the participation of women at decision-making levels in conflict resolution and peace processes.

## Regional Organizations

Various institutions of the European Union (EU) have similarly expressed their support for greater efforts to promote women's political participation. In 1995, the European Council approved a Resolution on the balanced participation of men and women in decision-making, affirming that “the objective of balanced participation of men and women in decision-making and the sharing of responsibilities between men and women in every sphere of life constitutes an important condition for equality between men and women.”



The Resolution invited member states to “develop an integrated global strategy for promoting the balanced participation of men and women in decision-making,” including compiling data, developing incentives, and launching public awareness campaigns. In 1996, the Council passed a Recommendation on the balanced participation of women and men in the decision-making process, calling upon member states to develop a “comprehensive, integrated strategy” that, “where necessary,” might include “legislative and/or regulatory measures and/or incentives.”

In 2000, the European Parliament approved a Resolution on women in decision-making, calling for a concrete action plan formulated by the various EU institutions with a time-table to achieve gender balance. Its main recommendations include “calls for the use of quotas as a transitional measure to even up the involvement of men and women in internal party structures and at an electoral level, for the introduction of a system in which there are alternate men and women candidates on election lists, and for the provision of political training and information for women candidates by the parties so that they can take up political life with full confidence.”

Alongside these efforts, the European Commission established a European Expert Network on Women in Decision-Making, funded for the years 1992-1996. A new group, the European Network to promote Women in Decision-making in Politics and the Economy, was funded for 2008-2012, and provided a platform at the EU level for discussing successful strategies and best practice to improve gender balance in decision-making positions. Continuity to the work of both networks has been provided in the form of an EU Database on women and men in decision-making. The current version is maintained by the European Institute for Gender Equality and tracks information on women and men in key decision-making positions – politics, public administration, judiciary, business and finance, social partners and NGOs, environment, and the media – in 35 European countries.

The CoE first organized a ministerial conference on “Equality between women and men in political life” in 1986. In 1989, a CoE seminar on “political strategies for the achievement of real equality of women and men” introduced the concept of “parity democracy,” linking gender equality and democracy and laying a strong foundation – especially in countries like France – to mobilize for gender quotas in politics. In 2003, the Committee of Ministers of the CoE adopted a Recommendation on “Balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making,” setting out clear objectives, guidelines, and measures aimed at remedying inequalities of representation. The two types of measures it proposes are legislative and administrative measures (focusing on elected and appointed offices) and support measures (including awareness-raising, research, and capacity-building). The 2014-2017 CoE Gender Equality Strategy lists “balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making” among its five strategic objectives.

The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) implements programs to increase the participation of women in politics and the public arena, contribute to the capacity building of women's networks, combat violence against women, and implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325. ODIHR developed a political party gender audit methodology – piloted in Armenia, Georgia, and Tajikistan between 2013 and 2015 – to determine the level of gender equality in key internal party processes, procedures, structures, and policies.

On the basis of this diagnosis of discriminatory practices, the methodology provides parties with tools to adjust their policies and strategies in line with gender equality principles. In Georgia, for example, three parties worked to develop plans that included organizing internal party meetings to discuss gender equality, improving coordination among their parties' female MPs to raise issues of concern to female voters, countering negative media portrayals of female candidates, and developing more active women's wings.

## The State

A potential tool to be used by States to promote gender equality and women's political participation are electoral gender quotas. This mechanism was discussed extensively during the Consultation, both as a tool defended by regional organizations and as a tool implemented by states represented at the Consultation. Quotas may appear in domestic legislation as a way to promote the inclusion of women politicians in the executive, legislative and judiciary branches. Quotas can also be initiated at the party level, applied voluntarily to party lists during the electoral process.

The effectiveness of quotas was discussed with insights from a variety of countries. Views were mixed as to the impact of these measures. For instance, quota systems were claimed to have been successful in Serbia, but the participant from Montenegro was hesitant to agree, arguing that the quota had led to the inclusion of less combative women in the party lists. Similarly, in Poland, parties tended to fill the 35% quota by nominating women who are not very active in their electoral districts to their lists. These women stand a low chance of being elected, but by filling the quota, parties are still able to register their lists. Representatives from the Serbian and Montenegrin parliaments explained that, along these lines, it was also common in their countries for party leaders to select women who they did not see as a threat to themselves in the political sense. In other countries, like France, some parties prefer to pay fines in order to exclude women from electoral lists. Quotas may bring more women into politics, therefore, but not remove all obstacles to women's political empowerment.

## PART III: Recommendations on how to effectively advance women's political participation

The Consultation participants discussed which direction regional organizations dealing with gender equality should take. They agreed that all stakeholders – international institutions, states, civil society organizations and equality bodies – need to cooperate and work together in favour of a more equal society, and the best way forward would be to combine political will with affirmative action. Several best practices and ways forward were addressed.

**First**, CEDAW provisions, combined with the implementation of UN Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, provide a strong normative basis for seeking to increase the number of women in politics.

**Second**, the OSCE experience suggests the need for a multi-actor, multi-stage approach to advancing women's political participation:

- Develop gender action plans (political parties);
- Conduct post-election gender analysis;
- Keep gender disaggregated data (local politicians);
- Establish a quota system to help women enter parliaments and afterwards create an environment so they can stay longer than one term (parliaments);
- A cost effective joint effort between international institutions and local stakeholders, such as civil society and national parliaments, to promote women in politics.

**Third**, men should be part of the discussion on how to reach gender equality. This is especially important at the political level where decision making should be made collaboratively by both men and women. More men advocating for equality means more recognition from society. One of the best examples is HeforShe, the United Nations campaign in which men are speaking out about positive aspects of equality between men and women.

**Fourth**, young men and women should be educated about democratic processes and the importance of an equal share of both sexes in the political sphere. Involvement of youth is vital to the advancement of women's rights.

**Fifth**, ongoing training for media is needed to ensure more balanced coverage of all candidates, regardless of their gender. Journalists should be made aware of conscious and unconscious bias, which may lead them to portray candidates based on gender stereotypes – rather than according to their plans and qualifications. UNDP projects on gender equality and the media could help inform this work.

**Sixth**, most of the top-performing countries in Europe use some form of gender quota, whether legislated or at the party level. This suggests that the most effective way to advance women's political participation is by introducing quotas or gender parity, leading to more women becoming candidates.

**Seventh**, because political parties are crucial in the process of empowering women in the election process, gender equality training should be mandatory for all party executives and party bodies. If there is no political will to implement a quota/parity system, the focus should be on introducing internal party regulations. Transparency of party funding should go along with economic empowerment of women. Women candidates for office should have access to funding to run their campaigns. Experiences with the OSCE political party gender audit suggest that auditing may be an effective way to assess progress, although many parliamentarians agree that their countries are still struggling to find the resources for its implementation and assessment of it is still a challenge. Adopting gender action plans can also provide a clear roadmap for political parties to further increase women's political participation and sensitize internal policies and procedures.

**Eighth**, there is a need for greater collaboration between different actors engaged in this issue. Joining forces would enable international and regional organizations to promote stronger and more cohesive mechanisms for advancing women's political participation. Fostering connections between female parliamentarians and civil society might help promote solidarity among female parliamentarians as well as better coordinate their gender equality efforts.

**Finally**, women from vulnerable groups should be more involved. The European Women's Lobby has a mentoring project promoting women from marginalized groups, such as migrant or refugee women, to be candidates in elections to the European Parliament.

# Conclusion

Gender equality in Europe is improving, but significant inequalities persist. Participants agreed that networks should be strengthened and tools already exist but are not used effectively, especially by political parties. Changing laws is relatively easy compared to changing the mentality and patriarchal thinking rooted in historical discriminatory practices towards women. Democracy without women is a half-democracy, and it is crucial that more party leaders understand this. Men and women must work together to build more fair and equal democracies.



## Community of Democracies

The Community of Democracies is an intergovernmental organization that drives the global democratic agenda through common action. Since its establishment in 2000, the Community has brought the world's democracies together to advance and promote the democratic principles and standards enshrined in the Warsaw Declaration Toward a Community of Democracies that was signed by 106 countries.

Building on the Warsaw Declaration, the Community's founding document that 106 countries signed in 2000, the Community of Democracies seeks to support democratic transition and consolidation worldwide by:

- Assisting societies in the development and strengthening of democratic institutions and values;
- Identifying, alerting and responding, consistent with the UN Charter and the Warsaw Declaration to threats to democracy so as to assist states to remain on the path to democracy;
- Supporting and defending civil society in all countries;
- Advancing broad-based participation in democratic governance;
- Giving a voice to those working peacefully for democracy in all countries.



## The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)/Inter-Regional Dialogue on Democracy (IRDD)

Since its inception in 1995, International IDEA has made significant contributions to the body of available knowledge and applicable policy options for promoting democratic participation and representation of women in decision-making processes. Through its global and regional programmes, IDEA supports political reform processes, awareness raising and capacity building on institutionalizing gender equality and women's empowerment in electoral and constitution-building processes, and within political parties. The Inter-Regional Dialogue on Democracy (IRDD) was launched in April 2011 by seven Regional Organizations and International IDEA at the headquarters of the Organization of American States (OAS). Its primary objective is to offer and facilitate a platform for regional organizations to exchange as peers' knowledge and experiences in the application of democratic principles.

To date, eight regional organizations are participating in the IRDD and these include the African Union (AU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Council of Europe (CoE), the European Union (EU), the League of Arab States (LAS), the OAS, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). International IDEA acts as the facilitator of the IRDD and functions as its dedicated secretariat through the Inter-Regional Democracy Resource Centre.



## United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

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UNDP works in nearly 170 countries and territories, helping to achieve the eradication of poverty, and the reduction of inequalities and exclusion. We help countries to develop policies, leadership skills, partnering abilities, institutional capabilities and build resilience in order to sustain development results. UNDP is working to strengthen new frameworks for development through integrated approach to supporting inclusive political processes in supporting and strengthening the capacities of political processes and institutions in order to improve citizen participation, voice and accountability. The advancement of women's equal participation and decision-making in political processes and institutions is one of the key priorities for UNDP across a variety of development contexts including stable, conflict/post conflict and transitional settings.



# Community of Democracies



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