



Community  
of Democracies

# Summary Report

## Women's Political Participation in Local Government

Side-event on the margins of the Third Committee at the 74th UNGA

October 2019, New York City

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# Introduction

The equal and meaningful participation of women at all levels of government is essential and is an active step in the direction to the attainment of the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda.

To discuss the role and impact of women in decision-making in local government, the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies (PSCD), in cooperation with the Community of Democracies (CoD) Working Group on Women and Democracy, held a side-event on “Women’s Political Participation in Local Government” on the margins of the Third Committee at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) at its 74th session on October 16, 2019, at 1:15 PM-2:30 PM, in New York City.

The aim of the panel was to highlight the valuable role that women mayors, governors, representatives of local governments and experts working in this area contribute to inclusive democracies. The side-event served as a platform for stakeholders to have an open conversation about the role of women in local government, barriers that women face to their meaningful participation and possible concerted actions in response to these challenges.

The discussion enabled sharing of best practices and lessons learned regarding women’s political engagement. It also served to identify important issues and provide recommendations aimed at fulfilling both Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 16.

The discussion points included:

- What is the role and impact of women’s meaningful participation in decision-making at the local level?
- What are the challenges that hinder women’s political participation and representation in local governance?
- What support and assistance do women need in preparing for political participation at the local level?
- What are the challenges and benefits of collecting data on women in local government?
- How to raise awareness about the importance of political participation of women at all levels.



# Speakers

## OPENING ADDRESS

### Mr. Thomas E. Garrett

Secretary General of the Community of Democracies

## WELCOMING REMARKS

### Ms. Audra Ciapiene

Chair of the Working Group on Women and Democracy of the CoD

## PANELISTS

### ■ Rohey Mlick Lowe, Lord Mayor of Banjul, The Gambia

Lord Mayor Lowe was elected Mayor of Banjul on May 2018 and indicated that one of her priorities is to ensure that the youth and women of Banjul are equipped with relevant skills to participate in society.

### ■ Yuliya Svitlychna, Governor of Kharkiv Oblast, Ukraine

Prior to this, Ms. Svitlychna was a Deputy of the Kharkiv Regional Council of 7th convocation. In the 2015 Ukrainian local elections Ms. Svitlychna was elected Deputy of Kharkiv Oblast Council. As Deputy, she was a member of Ukrainian delegation to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe for 2016–2020.

### ■ Dr. Sabine Freizer, Chief, Leadership and Governance, UN Women

Dr. Freizer joined UN Women from the Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia where she has been serving as a Policy Advisor on Governance, Peace, Security for 4 years. For six months in 2018, Dr. Freizer was also acting head of office in Turkey and acting head of office in Albania in 2019.

### ■ Aroa Santiago, Inclusive and Equitable Development Specialist, Gender Team, Bureau for Policy and Programme Support, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

Ms. Santiago is also the UNDP coordinator of the project Inclusive and Equitable Local Development (IELD), which is co-implemented by UNDP, UNCDF and UN Women and aims at unlocking finance and removing burdens for women’s economic empowerment at the local level.

# Opening Address

Mr. Thomas E. Garrett, Secretary General of the Community of Democracies

It is my pleasure to welcome you on behalf of the Community of Democracies to this panel discussion on “Women’s Political Participation in Local Government” on the margins of the Third Committee of the 74th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).

Advancing women’s political and economic participation is fundamental to a vibrant and durable democracy and is one of the key tenets of the Warsaw Declaration of the Community of Democracies, its founding document. Since its inception in 2000, the Community has been actively supporting activities dedicated to advancing women’s political participation, including the engagement of women in peacebuilding and peacekeeping efforts as well as preventing violent extremism.

Additionally, the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda adopted in September 2015 recognizes gender equality as crucial to the achievement of these goals. The importance of empowering women and girls is identified in Goal 5 of the Agenda, particularly in its target 5.5 on ensuring women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life.

Committed to women’s empowerment and gender equality in line with the UN’s 2030 Agenda and the Warsaw Declaration, gender equality is one of the three cross-cutting themes mainstreamed into all activities undertaken by the Community as part of the CoD’s Strategic Plan for 2018-2023.

One of the activities that supported women’s engagement in public life carried out by the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies was a project on Advancing Women’s Political Participation. To identify the main challenges that women face in politics and ways to overcome these challenges, the Community of Democracies, in cooperation with International IDEA and the UNDP, held five regional consultations on the margins of international forums in Europe, Asia, Africa, the Americas and the Middle East/North Africa. Regional consultations brought together civil society, government and private sector representatives as well as members of international and regional organizations to discuss strategies for advancing women’s political involvement in the respective regions.

Following the project’s successful implementation and in line with a continuous efforts to improve gender equality at all levels in various areas of decision-making, the Community of Democracies was here at the United Nations last month

to present to the international community a new publication on “Engaging Women in Sustaining Peace: A Guide to Best Practices”. This publication takes a global perspective examining women’s role in sustaining peace in Asia, Eurasia, Latin America and Africa, and identifies good practices and challenges in engaging women in conflict resolution, post-conflict planning, financing, governance, peacekeeping, rule of law, and economic recovery. Among recommendations identified, the study speaks

“ UNDERREPRESENTATION IS A GLOBAL ISSUE THAT NEEDS TO BE ADDRESSED AT ALL LEVELS, IN ALL FIELDS.

about importance of capacity building and training for female local officials to better perform their political duties, implementation of gender quotas at local level and calls on local governments to submit reports on their progress toward gender equality.

Although women make up 50 per cent of the world’s population, they are underrepresented in political decision-making at almost every level in nearly every country, especially at the local level, as worldwide, women make up less than five percent of mayors.

Underrepresentation is a global issue that needs to be addressed at all levels, in all fields.

Therefore, the efforts of the Working Group on Women and Democracy to promote women’s rights, foster women’s political participation and leadership are particularly important. I would like to extend gratitude to its Member States: El Salvador, Finland, Japan, Republic of Korea, Uruguay, and especially to the Republic of Lithuania for hosting this event, and to Ms. Audra Ciapiene, who serves as the Chair of the Working Group.

Finally, thank you to our panelists, partner organizations and attendees, for contributing their time and knowledge to today’s important discussion.

I look forward to a fruitful conversation.

# Welcoming Remarks

Ms. Audra Ciapiene, Chair of the Working Group on Women and Democracy of the CoD

On behalf of the Working Group on Women and Democracy, I am delighted to welcome you to the important and relevant discussion about women’s political participation in local government to highlight challenges that women face as well as their notable contributions in these settings.

The political realm is considered to be one of the most challenging spheres of the public life for women to participate in. Although a few national parliaments have come close to gender parity, less than one-fourth of states have 30 percent or more women in decision-making positions. It remains uncommon for women to reach high-level decision-making posts, such as heads of state, elected ministers, or speakers of parliament. Although considerable evidence demonstrates that women’s participation has increased over the past decade, there is still a great deal of work to be done in achieving true gender parity. Political parties and their leaders do not always take an active role in advancing women’s political participation or recognize its true value.

There are a lot of arguments why women’s political participation is important. According to the research of the National Democratic Institute, (a) women prioritize education, health, education, and other key development indicators. There is also strong evidence that (b) as more women are elected to office, there is a corollary increase in policy making that emphasizes quality of life and reflects the priorities of families, women, and ethnic and racial minorities; (c) women work across party lines, even in highly partisan environments; (d) women lawmakers are highly responsive to constituent concerns; (e) women’s participation encourages citizen confidence in democracy; (f) women’s participation in politics helps advance gender equality and affects both the range of policy issues that get considered and the types of solutions that are proposed; (g) women in political office tend to prioritize efforts to advance rights, promote equality, and leverage opportunity for women and girls; (h) women help secure lasting peace. Research has also shown that (i) women in government tend to work in more collaborative and bipartisan ways and employ a more democratic leadership style compared to men’s more autocratic style; (j) women are also more effective at building coalitions and reaching consensus.

As the Secretary General noted, the Community of Democracies has conducted a project focusing on advancing women’s political participation that I had a pleasure to contribute to. As we know, many indicators and initiatives focus on measuring and increasing the number of women in national legislatures. However, the representation of women at regional and local levels of government should not be neglected. During the Americas consultation of the Community’s project, participants noted, “While there has been progress in women’s political participation in the region at the national level, the local level paints a very different picture. Women are underrepresented in municipal politics, particularly in executive positions.”

Additionally, the Consultation reflected on the importance of data collection for raising awareness and accelerating progress on a range of aspects of women’s political participation, “Stakeholders should do more to promote women’s political participation at the local level. Such efforts should ensure that they work to incorporate women who experience multiple forms of disadvantage including indigenous women.”

Under the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Targets 5.5 and 16.7 specifically mention the importance of ensuring inclusive participation at all levels. To track progress of women’s political participation at the local level, UN Women developed SDG Indicator 5.5.1b, which measures the proportion of women in local governments. While the global share of women elected to local governments is still unknown, UN Women’s early research suggests that at the local level women’s representation also remains elusive.

Accordingly, to the SDG 5, women and girls must have the same rights and opportunities afforded to them as their male counterparts. That being said, we are seeing traditional gender roles being gradually diminished as women are more frequently being included and are bringing meaningful contributions to not only their society but the world at large. Today we will be highlighting these valuable contributions women mayors, governors and representatives make to ensure a thriving, inclusive society where, as per Sustainable Development Goal 16, peace, justice and strong institutions prevail.

I thank you all for your participation and I look forward to an engaging panel discussion.

# Summary of the Panel Discussion

## Women's Political Participation in Local Government

**Governor Yulia Svitlychna**, began the panel discussion by noting the importance of women's political participation for achieving a just and peaceful society and strong economic growth. As the first female head of the region since the founding of the city 665 years ago, Governor Svitlychna spoke about her experience in local government to highlight the positive strides that have been made since Ukraine declared independence 28 years ago. Among others, the Governor stressed the successes achieved in overcoming gender stereotypes as well as Ukraine's advancement toward a society of equal opportunities with a well-established system of social elevators, free of negative presumptions.

Governor Svitlychna mentioned the recent launch of various programs in Kharkiv Region, specifically addressing women's needs such as, the development of gender centers in all leading universities and the creation of social centers to tackle domestic violence issues throughout the region. According to the panelist, the increase of women's representation in local government contributed to the development of more gender responsive policies and programs of this kind. While in 2015, women held only 19 per cent of seats in Kharkiv Regional Council, the most recent local elections saw the proportion of women rise to 40 per cent. Despite ongoing conflict in Donbas which brought various challenges, including the arrival of 200 000 internally displaced persons, Kharkiv Region thrived economically and remained one of the most peaceful regions in the East of Ukraine. This shows the direct link between peacefulness, economic prosperity and inclusivity. Governor Svitlychna concluded that gender equality and the empowerment of women in local government requires a change in mindset along with more concrete actions, such as the implementation of quotas in the legislature.

**Lord Mayor Lowe**, the first woman mayor in The Gambia, emphasized the value of women's representation in politics at the local level. Drawing from her direct experience, Mayor Lowe argued that women's equal and meaningful participation in local governments has a significant and positive impact on policies ranging from social welfare to gender equality. She further noted the importance of women's participation at all levels of government by highlighting that their absence often leads to the under-representation of citizens' interests. To that end, the Lord Mayor called on the international community to support women's political leadership by investing in education through capacity-building and political training programs. She urged this assistance be carried out through a bottom-up approach to support locally led processes that strengthen women's political participation.

Mentioning the challenges that women face in The Gambia and Africa as a whole, Lord Mayor Lowe underlined, among others, the negative stereotypes that women are subjected to from both men and women. The panelist also noted the lack of resources as an obstacle to women's political participation as well as culturally rooted traditions. More specifically, women are expected to fulfil gender traditional roles, such as housewives, while child marriage still remains a common practice. The Lord Mayor also emphasized men's lack of confidence in women's professional capacity and support within political parties and their constant attempts to marginalize women in these settings.

**Ms. Aroa Santiago** discussed the inter-relationship between economic and political empowerment. The speaker stressed the need for a more holistic approach to increase women's representation in local governments as well as to ensure that their participation is meaningful. To that end, Ms. Santiago recommended engaging women both as voters as well as candidates through awareness raising campaigns, trainings and special measures. She also highlighted the demonstrated successes in adopting gender quotas and the critical role that women's coalitions and networks play in women's empowerment.

“WOMEN'S EQUAL AND MEANINGFUL REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES IS CRITICAL FOR PRIORITIZING WOMEN PARTICULAR NEEDS AND ISSUES IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AGENDA AND FOR LOCALIZING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS.”

Speaking from her experience in Kyrgyzstan, Ms. Santiago emphasized that while both men and women must be actively engaged in the decision-making in local communities, we need to consider the patriarchal society where women are often not ready to be perceived as leaders. Thus, the panelist recommended encouraging women's political participation through an inclusive process of economic empowerment that progressively incorporates women in the economy, and which then leads to a spill-over into the political community decision-making processes. Ms. Santiago concluded by reiterating that women's participation in local government is not just important in order to ensure human rights for women but also for the prosperousness of communities and the wider economy.

**Dr. Sabine Freizer** brought technical expertise regarding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and specifically the Goal 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls). The speaker underlined the importance to achieve the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Agenda, highlighting the critical need for delivering Goal 5, not just as an end in itself but also because gender equality is a recognized accelerator for all of the SDGs.

When discussing women's under-representation in leadership roles across sectors in society, Dr. Freizer raised the important point that while women represent 39 per cent of the global workforce, they only hold 27 per cent of managerial positions. Dr. Freizer presented findings of UN Women's research regarding the proportion of seats held by women in deliberative bodies of local governments. Based on 99 countries and four territories, the findings showed that in January 2019, the average proportion of women holding elected office at the local level was 26 per cent with very few countries meeting the 40 per cent gender balance line. Dr. Freizer also stressed that the findings were quite diverse with marginal differences among the regions. The panelist also informed that there was almost no correlation between the proportion of women in national parliaments and the proportion of women at the local level.

Dr. Freizer concluded by outlining the obstacles in acquiring this data due to the organizational differences in governmental structures around the world and because of the lack of national statistics on women's participation in local government which might denote a potential lack of awareness on its importance.

During the open discussion, **Mr. Robin Ogilvy** representing the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development, reiterated panelists' comments regarding the importance of gender equality in its own right as well as for our economies, societies and environment. Pointing to the empirical research conducted on the topic, Mr. Ogilvy highlighted that governments with prominent women's participation not only function better but enjoy more public trust. Studies have shown that greater female participation leads to an improvement of public health care and a decrease in inequalities. Mr. Ogilvy concluded his intervention by drawing attention to the issue of leadership in politics. While gender balance or quotas can play an important role, it is critical to ensure that women reach leadership positions and participate in decision-making.

“WE CANNOT WORK ON LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT WITHOUT WORKING ON WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION SIMULTANEOUSLY.”

“GENDER EQUALITY HAS BEEN RECOGNIZED AS AN ACCELERATOR TO MEET ALL THE TARGETS OF THE SDGs.”

## CoD and Gender Equality

Gender equality and political empowerment of women are key elements for the consolidation of sustainable democracies worldwide. Since its inception in 2000, the Community of Democracies has been actively supporting activities dedicated to advancing women's political participation, including the engagement of women in peace-building efforts and countering violent extremism. In the Community's Strategic Plan 2018-2023, gender equality is one of the cross-cutting themes mainstreamed into all activities undertaken by the Community.

### Past activities

#### [Women for Peace: Recognizing Women's Role in Peacebuilding](#)

Side-event on the margins of the 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly, September 2019

The event was carried out in the framework of the Community's project "Engaging Women in Sustaining Peace (EWSP)", generously supported by the Republic of Korea. It consisted of a presentation of the publication on "Engaging Women in Sustaining Peace: A Guide to Best Practices" followed by a panel discussion on the importance of women's meaningful participation in peace processes and political agreements. Access the [Summary Report](#).

#### [Women's Participation in Sustaining Peace and in the advancement of Goal 16: Practices from Latin America](#)

Side-event on the margins of the 49th Regular Session of the Organization of American States General Assembly, in Medellín, Colombia, June 2019

The event was organized by the PSCD and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) in partnership with the Latin American and Caribbean Network for Democracy (REDLAD), a regional civil society platform, member of the Civil Society Pillar of the Community of Democracies and The Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia (MAPP/OAS). The panel discussion addressed the important role that women play in sustaining peace, and in moving forward the implementation of Goal 16 of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Access the [Summary Report](#).

#### [Building Sustainable Peace: The Importance of Women's Inclusion](#)

Satellite event on the margins of the World Forum for Democracy in Strasbourg, November 2018

The panel discussion was built around the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Women experts in the field provided specific lessons learned and best practices for advancing women's participation in sustaining peace from Syria, the Balkans, Central Africa and South America. Highlighted issues included: ensuring meaningful participation of women and inclusive decision-making at the national, regional and global levels; the nexus between democracy and security; and the role of just and strong institutions for sustaining peace. Access the [Summary Report](#).

#### [Women: A Powerful Force for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism](#)

Policy session held on the margins of the Women Political Leaders Summit in Vilnius, June 2018

Held within the "Engaging Women in Sustainable Peace" project, the session addressed the importance of gender inclusion in preventing and countering violent extremism. With panelists from NATO, OSCE, Women in International Security, and European External Action Service, the discussion aimed to identify good practices for increasing women's political participation. Access the [Summary Report](#).

#### [Advancing Women's Political Participation](#)

Regional consultations organized with the United Nations Development Programme and International IDEA, 2016-2017

As part of the project, five regional consultations were held on the margins of large international de-moray-related events in Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America and MENA region. Consultations brought together politicians, state officials, civil society activists, academics, and members of international and regional organizations to discuss gender equality and strategies for advancing women's political empowerment in respective regions. Access the [Final Report](#).

## About the CoD

Born as a common initiative of former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Polish Foreign Minister Bronisław Geremek, the Community of Democracies was founded at the Ministerial Conference held in Warsaw, Poland, where high-level delegations from 106 countries adopted the Warsaw Declaration, Toward a Community of Democracies. Signatories pledged to uphold the democratic values expressed in the Warsaw Declaration and to support them through a variety of initiatives.

Since its establishment in 2000, the Community of Democracies gradually developed from a conference initiative into a global intergovernmental coalition of democratic states and a multi-stakeholder platform for dialogue and discussion.

The Community of Democracies provides Member States with a forum in which to work together to learn from each other and identify global priorities for diplomatic action to advance and defend democracy, including through collective diplomatic action at the UN and in other multilateral fora. In addition to facilitating joint diplomatic action, the Community provides an international forum that facilitates mutual dialogue, learning, and exchange of experiences among Members.



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