European Parliament

Women in politics in the EU
State of play

SUMMARY

One hundred years after women won the vote or were first elected to parliament in some EU countries, the data show that women continue to be under-represented in politics and public life, in the European Parliament, national parliaments and governments, and local assemblies.

The arguments for gender balance in politics are numerous, and benefit not only women and female politicians, but also parties themselves and the rest of society. After all, women form half the population and need to be better represented in power structures. However, there is now solid evidence both of obstacles and of the strategies that are effective when it comes to increasing women's participation and representation. Here, political parties and the media can be both barriers and important enablers. The EU has committed to achieving a gender balance in political representation and participation as a matter of justice, equality and democracy. Concrete recommendations have been made for achieving this goal, including specific action that could be taken by the EU institutions, national governments, political parties, civil society and the media.

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has shone a spotlight on the issue of women's leadership and its implications for gender equality.

*This is an update of a* Briefing *from March 2019, drafted by Rosamund Shreeves and Martina Prpic.*

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Context

In several EU Member States, a century has now passed since women won the right to vote in national elections, were elected to national parliaments or first held a ministerial position. Nevertheless, one hundred years on, Europe-wide data show that women are still under-represented in political decision-making at local, national and European levels. The Gender Equality Index developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) to measure gender gaps over time shows that although 'power' is the area where most progress has been made in the past 10 years, it is also the area where the gender gap remains widest. With a score of 100 equalling gender balance, Sweden is currently the only EU country to score over 90 on the 'political power' indicator, which is based on the share of women ministers, members of parliament and women in regional assemblies. Some Member States, such as Slovenia and France, have made major strides, but the fact that other countries' scores have declined, some from an already low base, illustrates that increases in women's political representation are not necessarily linear or self-evident (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Gender equality index – Political power, change between 2005 and 2018
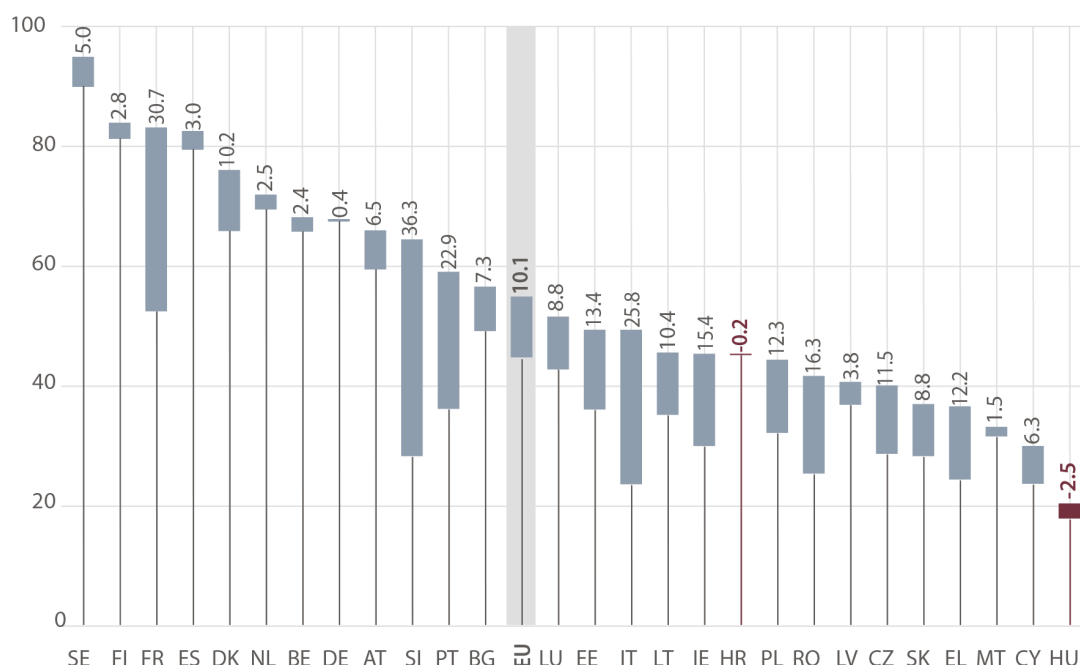
Source: EIGE gender statistics database: power, 2005 and 2018.
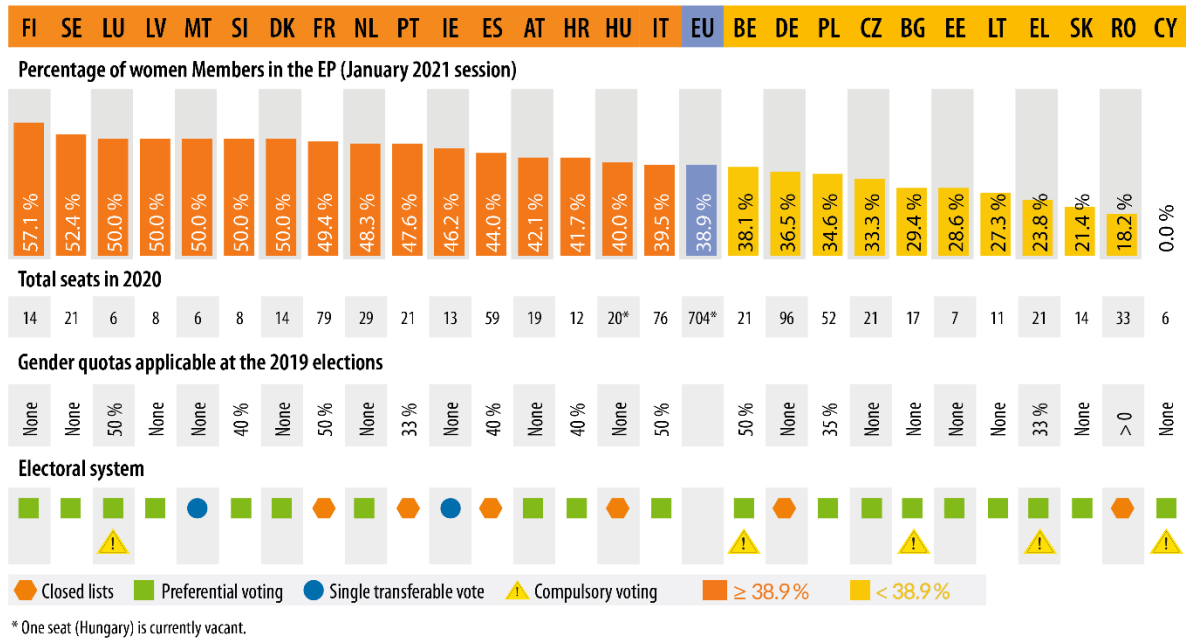(Data from the 2020 index are mostly from 2018.)

Gender gap in political representation

European level

From a low 16.6 % of female Members in the first directly elected legislature in 1979, the percentage of women has risen after each election up to 41% after the 2019 elections. As of January 2021, the percentage of women Members of the European Parliament has fallen since the 2019 elections and now stands at 38.9 %.[1] This is above the world average for national parliaments and above the European average for national parliaments, which stands at 30.5 %. However, there are large differences between Member States. At one end of the spectrum, a growing number of countries are at or around parity. At the other end, in Cyprus, Romania, Slovakia and Greece, women make up less than a quarter of Members of the European Parliament. Cyprus now has no women Members, a contrast with the share of 16.7 % in the last mandate. In Bulgaria, the share of women has risen to 29.4 % from 17.6 % in the last mandate. Interestingly, Malta, whose gender-equality record in

national politics is near the bottom compared to other EU Member States, has gender parity in the European Parliament, with 50 % of its Members being women.

Figure 2 – Share of women in the European Parliament

	FI	SE	LU	LV	MT	SI	DK	FR	NL	PT	IE	ES	AT	HR	HU	IT	EU	BE	DE	PL	CZ	BG	EE	LT	EL	SK	RO	CY
Percentage of women Members in the EP (January 2021 session)	57.1 %	52.4 %	50.0 %	50.0 %	50.0 %	50.0 %	50.0 %	49.4 %	48.3 %	47.6 %	46.2 %	44.0 %	42.1 %	41.7 %	40.0 %	39.5 %	38.9 %	38.1 %	36.5 %	34.6 %	33.3 %	29.4 %	28.6 %	27.3 %	23.8 %	21.4 %	18.2 %	0.0 %
Total seats in 2020	14	21	6	8	6	8	14	79	29	21	13	59	19	12	20*	76	704*	21	96	52	21	17	7	11	21	14	33	6
Gender quotas applicable at the 2019 elections	None	None	50 %	None	None	40 %	None	50 %	None	33 %	None	40 %	None	40 %	None	50 %		50 %	None	35 %	None	None	None	None	33 %	None	> 0	None

Electoral system

◆ Closed lists ■ Preferential voting ● Single transferable vote ⚠ Compulsory voting ■ ≥ 38.9 % ■ < 38.9 %

* One seat (Hungary) is currently vacant.

Source: European Parliamentary Research Service.

The proportion of women in the European Commission has fluctuated over time. In 2019, the first ever female President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, set a goal of constituting a gender-balanced College of Commissioners. At the beginning of her mandate, 12 of the 27 Commission members were women, compared to 9 out of 28 Commissioners at the end of the previous mandate. Following the appointment of Mairead McGuinness to the Commission in October 2020, the College is now made up of 13 women (48.1 %) and 14 men. One of the two Executive Vice-Presidents is a woman, together with two of the other six Vice-Presidents. The female Commissioners hold a spectrum of portfolios: the digital age; values and transparency; demography, health; transport; home affairs; cohesion; energy; innovation, research, culture, education and youth; financial services; international partnerships and a new portfolio on equality. Many of these are in 'traditionally female' domains. Ursula von der Leyen has also committed to achieve full equality at all levels of Commission management by the end of 2024.

National level

There are more men than women in all EU Member State national parliaments (See Figure 3). When it comes to the members of national governments of Member States, the shares of women range from higher

Figure 3 – Share of women in national parliaments (both houses)
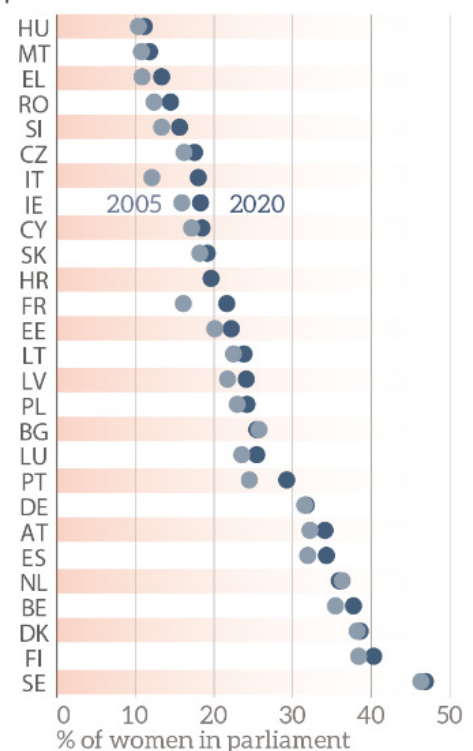
Source: EIGE gender statistics database: power, 2020. (Data from the last quarter of 2020.)

in Finland (54.5 %), Austria (52.9 %), Sweden (52.2 %), France (51.2 %) and Belgium (50 %), to very low shares in Greece (11.3 %) and Malta (7.7 %). Five Member States – Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany and Lithuania – have female prime ministers. Estonia and Greece have female presidents.

Local and regional levels

The situation at national, regional and local and regional levels shows similar levels of gender inequality, with an average of 32.1 % of women in regional assemblies in the EU. Progress has been slow. According to the European Commission's 2019 report on equality between women and men in the EU, the proportion of women in regional assemblies has improved by an average rate of just 0.3 % per year since 2005. The high achievers at national level are also the high achievers at regional level, with Spain, France, Sweden and Finland approaching gender parity. At the other end of the scale are Hungary, Slovakia and Romania, with the percentage of women not even reaching 20 %. Local and municipal councils are also short of women representatives, with the EU average equalling 34.1 % of women. While France and Spain have over 40 % of women on local and municipal councils, Romania, Cyprus, and Greece trail behind with under 20 % of women.

Appointments to ministerial portfolios and parliament committees

Analysis of EIGE data found significant gender differences in the portfolios held by senior ministers in national governments. Men were most often assigned high profile portfolios such as foreign and internal affairs, defence and justice (42.8 % versus 32.1 %), and finance and industry (23.1 % versus 18.6 %), while women were more likely to be given socio-cultural portfolios such as health, education or social affairs (40.4 % versus 19.4 %). Country-level analysis for parliamentary committees in Germany, Sweden and Portugal, points to similar gender differences, but no single pattern of change over time. In Sweden, gender-based differences diminished as the share of women in parliament rose, but this was not the case in Germany. In the European Parliament, women currently chair 11 of the 27 committees, including the committees on budgetary control, internal market, economic and monetary affairs, security and defence and transport.

Diversity of women in politics

No EU-wide data[2] exists on political representation of different groups of women, such as women from ethnic minorities, LGBTI women, older or younger women, or women with disabilities, but the data available suggest that these groups are under-represented. For example, Roma minorities are one of the most politically under-represented groups in the EU; the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) have flagged the particularly low number of Roma women in elected office as a concern. Analysis by the European Network Against Racism (ENAR), following the 2019 European elections found that ethnic minorities made up 5 % of Members of the European Parliament and 10 % of the overall population. Following Brexit, the share of ethnic minorities in the Parliament fell to 4 %. A 2018 report finds that European countries follow the global pattern of male parliamentarians outnumbering their female counterparts in every age category, albeit with more gender balance among younger members of parliament. Interestingly, research finds that throughout the European Parliament's history, from 1979 to the 2014-2019 session, more young than middle-aged or older women were elected.

Public opinion

Voter attitudes towards women are a key determinant of how many women are elected. According to the 2017 Special Eurobarometer survey on women in politics, 86 % of respondents think that a female political representative can represent their interests, with women being more likely to agree than men (88 % of women compared to 83 % of men). Slightly fewer respondents (82 %) think that a male political representative can represent their interests, with 80 % of them being women and 84 % of them being men.

Views on the existing distribution of power, and whether there should be more women in decision-making positions, are more nuanced and gendered. Among women, 62 % think that there should be more women in political decision-making positions in their country, while only 44 % of men agree. As regards the question of whether gender equality in politics has been achieved, 51 % of respondents think it has been achieved, more than at work (48 %) or in leadership positions in companies and other organisations (44 %). However, there is again a significant gap between men and women. Among men, 57 % think that gender equality has been achieved in politics, and among women, only 45 % agree. There are also significant differences among Member States, with 75 % thinking it has been achieved in Denmark or 67 % in Latvia or Finland, and significantly fewer people thinking it has been achieved in France (32 %), Hungary (35 %) or Spain (36 %). The promotion of gender equality as being important to ensure a fair and democratic society is recognised by 91 % of respondents, with almost no gender difference. There is a difference among those who totally agree with this statement, 51 % of them being men and 57 % women.

Women's political participation

Women's representation in parliaments and other elected political posts is not the only means through which women are politically active and does not give a complete picture of their power. Much has been written on female voter behaviour, for example, as well as other, non-electoral forms of political participation, such as protest participation, political persuasion and campaigning, where it has been observed that gender differences and inequalities persist. When it comes to voting preferences, research has shown that women have been moving toward the left of men in advanced industrial societies, although not in post-communist societies, where women favour the right. Recent research also notes the increasing popularity of right-wing populist and right-wing extremist parties among women in Europe, in large part because of their focus on satisfying women's practical interests, such as social policies focused on family welfare, increased family benefits and similar.

Many studies have shown that women on average tend to know or claim to know less about politics than men, although some research has demonstrated that other factors, such as question format in surveys where they are asked those questions or the content of the questions, may also have an impact. This is problematic, as political knowledge is crucial for effective participation in politics. Similar results can be seen in the 2019 post-election Eurobarometer survey, which reveals that women were more prone than men to state that they did not vote because they did not know much about the European Parliament or the European elections and less prone than men to state that they voted because they were very interested in European affairs.

However, when it comes to actual voting in elections, the gap between men and women decreases, with virtually no differences between men and women in giving importance to personally voting in national or European elections. Indeed, research has shown that traditional gender differences in voting participation diminished a couple of decades ago in many industrialised countries, although there are recent studies that show that this may be the case for national elections, there is still a gender gap in voter turnout in second-order elections (of which the European Parliament elections are an example). In the 2019 European Parliament elections, both women and men were more likely to vote than in the 2014 European elections (+8 and +7 percentage points respectively), but men were slightly more likely to vote than women (52 % versus 49 %). Nevertheless, the European Commission reports that the gender gap in turnout reduced from 4 % in 2014 to 3 % in 2019.

Research in the United States (US) has also shown that women are consistently less likely to participate in many political activities, such as making campaign contributions, joining political organisations or writing letters to political representatives, and the results were repeated in studies analysing several other democratic systems. There are several explanations for this phenomenon, but the most significant are those that attribute this difference to women's diminished resources compared to men and the societal values that may push women away from political activity. As regards non-electoral participation, research shows that across 18 industrialised democracies, women are more likely to sign a petition or raise money for a political group, but less likely to join a

demonstration. Women are more likely to participate in political consumer activities than men, where they may buy or boycott products for political or ethical reasons.

Why gender balance in politics matters

There are several arguments in favour of equal representation of women in politics. However, before addressing them, attention must be paid to two types of representation that are expected to be achieved through gender equality measures: descriptive and substantive.[3] According to descriptive representation, which refers to achieving the requisite numbers of women in political leadership, the presence of women in political leadership is important in and of itself because it helps lend legitimacy to governing institutions and provides female role models. For example, research has shown that in some European countries, descriptive representation narrows gender differences in political participation, although this link may not be as straightforward in other contexts. Substantive representation, meanwhile, looks at the effects that could be achieved through better representation of women and postulates that the participation of women increases the likelihood both that women's interests will be adequately represented and that governing institutions will function more effectively owing to women's distinctive backgrounds and governing styles.

There have been several attempts to systematise the arguments into meaningful groups. The United Nations, for example, summarised the arguments for more women in politics into six groups: the **justice** argument, according to which women account for approximately half the population and therefore have the right to be represented as such; the **experience** argument (women's experiences are different from men's and need to be represented in discussions that result in policy-making and implementation); the **interest** argument (the interests of men and women are different and even conflicting and therefore women are needed in representative institutions to articulate the interests of women); the **critical mass** argument (women are able to achieve solidarity of purpose to represent women's interests when they achieve certain levels of representation); the **symbolic** argument (women are attracted to political life if they have role models in the arena), and the **democracy** argument (the equal representation of women and men enhances democratisation of governance in both transitional and consolidated democracies).

The OSCE talks about the benefits of supporting women's political participation, and focuses on the main beneficiaries. It distinguishes between **traditional** benefits (based on the human rights instruments and international standards for democratic institutions), benefits for **political parties** (women and men bring different perspectives, and parties can reap benefits by including more women, as it improves party image and electoral strategy and combats decline in party membership), benefits for **women politicians** (enabling them to play a more prominent role in the political process and change perceptions regarding women's capacities) and benefits for **society** (more women in power will raise awareness of policy issues affecting women and gender-based discrimination and increase public trust in the political system, because it is perceived as more representative of the electorate).

However, some of these arguments and assumptions have also been evaluated as problematic.[4] The argument that claims that men's and women's experiences are different and need to be represented by men and women respectively is evaluated as problematic because it treats women as a homogenous group and assumes that there is a 'female' way of doing politics. Some research has found few gender differences in political leadership style or approach. There are many cases of female political leaders who belie the stereotype of women as more collaborative and conciliatory. However, there is research that proves otherwise: there have been reports that in the US Congress female legislators are more collaborative than men and that women have an approach that is less confrontational and less partisan. It is also not entirely correct to assume that the advancement of issues important to women takes precedence over party affiliation or party loyalty in women politicians. Women politicians also have multiple identities, and their identity as a woman may not always prevail in identifying priorities. Some early female politicians had a tendency to minimise their identity as women and their association with women's issues.

Obstacles to gender balance

While research initially attributed women's continued under-representation in politics to a lack of political ambition, it is now recognised that other more structural and societal barriers continue to hinder women from seeking office and from fulfilling their mandates or accessing leadership positions once they are elected. There are also concerns about additional or specific barriers that can face different groups of women on account of their age, class, ethnic background, religion, disability, or sexual orientation.

Since they are closely connected with different cultural, economic and political contexts and electoral systems, the obstacles that women politicians encounter are not identical across the EU. However, analyses find that three inter-related sets of factors contribute towards women's under-representation. First, there are **barriers that block the 'supply' of women entering politics**. These include women's individual perceptions of their own abilities and of the costs and risks of running for office, together with broader factors that can shape their choices and discourage them from doing so, such as: **unequal access to key resources** such as time, money, and political networks; **unequal family responsibilities**; **male-dominated political cultures** in parties and parliaments; **gender roles and stereotypes** in wider society; and an **absence of female role models**. Under the influence of gender stereotyping, obstacles to women's participation in politics can start at a very young age, with the shaping of different career aspirations for girls and boys in school. Part of this stereotyping can be a message that women 'are not made for' politics or are not 'legitimate' political actors. Although women now sit alongside men in parliaments and government, powerful women – and the association of women with power – continue to elicit strong, negative reactions, which remain a barrier to women wishing to enter – and thrive – in politics and other areas of leadership. The **level of abuse and** violence directed at women in politics and public life because they are women, and sometimes because of their increased presence, is a growing concern in itself. There is also a risk that it will deter women from engaging in politics because they find the environment too toxic. A survey conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 2018 found an alarming level of sexism, harassment and violence against women members of parliament in Europe. Those aged under 40 were more frequently subject to psychological and sexual harassment, and members taking a strong stance on women's rights and gender equality were singled out for attack. A majority (79.2 %) of members who had been victims of harassment and violence were determined to stay in office and run for another term, but 33.3 % said that it had affected their freedom of expression and scope for action during their term of office. The high level of abuse against female parliamentary staff is also a concern, not least because this can be a starting point for a career in politics.

Second, there are **barriers limiting 'demand' for women candidates**. These include the way in which **political parties – as key gatekeepers to political office – recruit, select and champion candidates**, and **voters' preferences or attitudes** towards women's engagement in public life or as politicians. The relative influence of parties and voters varies in different electoral systems. In the most 'closed' systems, where voters vote for a party rather than individual candidates, parties have the greatest influence over which candidates are elected, but voters have more influence in 'open list' systems, where they are able to vote directly for specific candidates.

Third, it has been established that systems that are based entirely on proportional representation, or that include an element of proportional representation are more effective in promoting the election of female candidates than plurality/majority systems based entirely on single-member constituencies,[5] making electoral systems themselves a potential **institutional barrier**.

A report on women's experiences of selection and election to the United Kingdom (UK) Parliament highlights the cumulative impact these kinds of obstacles can have at different stages of the journey to political office and beyond.

Specific obstacles to gender balance in the European Parliament

An [analysis](#) of the outcome of the 2014 elections found that women had been popular with the electorate and, where voters could express a preference for individual candidates, they appeared more likely to select women. In countries with a low proportion of female Members elected to the European Parliament, one key reason was the low share of women in the candidate base. Party processes had been a significant contributing factor. Survey respondents felt that, owing to a reluctance on the part of [European political parties](#)[6] and EU actors in general to intervene in national political party decisions, European political parties had missed an opportunity to encourage their national parties to promote gender balance on party lists. Only two of the six largest European political parties had mentioned gender equality in their election manifesto and none had called specifically for the adoption of gender quotas. For future elections, the report called for a more complete and comprehensive dataset on candidates, electoral systems, gender and age of candidates, and quota or zipping systems applied, as a basis for more robust analyses of the factors that affect women's chances of election. In its [report](#) on the 2019 European elections, the European Commission concluded that the quality of indicators and data collected on the participation of specific groups is limited.

Strategies for closing the gender gap

The [EIGE](#), the [expert committee](#) that advises on gender equality policy at EU level, the European Women's Lobby ([EWL](#)), the [Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly](#), and [research](#) for the European Parliament promote a holistic approach and have identified a number of good practices and steps that legislators, governments, parliaments, political parties and civil society can take to improve gender balance in political representation. These range from **'hard' measures** such as changing electoral systems and requiring legislated gender quotas, to **'soft' measures** such as introducing voluntary party quotas and providing training, mentoring, funding and other support for women candidates, particularly young women and women from under-represented minority groups.

From the broadest perspective, to **build a pipeline into public life and politics**, governments, political parties, civil society, the media and the European institutions can challenge the gender stereotypes that delegitimise women's participation and proactively encourage girls and women to get involved. Grassroots activism can lead to involvement in local politics, and then to politics at national level.

One Europe-wide survey[7] found that a sizeable minority of young party members have a longstanding desire to enter politics. A [survey](#) of women's political careers has also shown that many women wish to enter politics later in life, when they have fewer family responsibilities. Here, [political parties](#) can reach out proactively to **expand the pool of women candidates**. Women members [surveyed](#) in the UK said that being directly asked to run by their political party or a political mentor was a key factor in their decision to seek selection, a finding echoed in the global survey of women's political careers. Political parties are also [urged](#) to give prospective women candidates a clear message that they are wanted, by adopting a statement on gender equality in their founding documents and putting it into practice, for example, by setting targets for female participation in party conventions, establishing women's sections and ensuring that gender is included in all of the party's policies. [Research](#) also suggests that **women's parties** have been successful in increasing women's representation in a number of EU countries, by 'embarrassing' other more mainstream and more powerful parties for not putting women forward as candidates, including women in party leadership, or addressing women's concerns.

Various forms of gender quotas (see Box 1) have been found to be an effective way of **boosting the share of women candidates** – and getting more women elected. Research has [shown](#) that in some EU countries, the introduction of gender quotas led to immediate major leaps (increases of more than 10 percentage points) in women's representation in national parliaments, but in others, the results were slower or less successful. It concluded that quotas can increase women's representation but, to be effective, they must be designed to fit the electoral system, and include rules on the

placing of candidates in 'winnable' seats and effective sanctions for non-compliance. In addition, further steps must be taken to reach a diverse range of women.

Box 1 – Spotlight on gender quotas

Gender quotas are numerical targets stipulating a number or share of women – or candidates of either gender – that must be included in a candidate list or the number of seats to be allocated to women or either gender in a legislature. Mainly considered as temporary measures, to be discontinued once equality of opportunity and treatment has been achieved, they aim to reverse discrimination and hidden barriers preventing women from being selected as candidates and to level the playing field for women and men in politics. Advocates argue that, beyond increasing the overall presence of women in political institutions, they can create the kind of political system that allows both men and women to participate and gives the electorate real choices about who will represent them.

In Europe, there are two main types of gender quota: **legislated quotas** (implemented through reforms to electoral laws or constitutions, requiring that all parties nominate a certain proportion of women candidates on their electoral lists); and **voluntary party quotas** (commitments made by individual political parties to include a certain percentage of women party members among candidates for election). Both legal and voluntary party quotas may target any of the three stages in the candidate selection process: aspirants, candidates and elected representatives. Numerical quotas may also be supplemented by other measures, such as 'zipper systems' (mandated alternation of women and men on party lists), or all women shortlists, aimed at ensuring that the measure is not purely symbolic and that women are selected in 'winnable' positions or seats.

The use of quotas is controversial, as some have concerns that they violate the principle of merit, could lead to a decline in the quality of politicians, undermine the credibility of women politicians, or provoke hostility from the electorate. Nevertheless, across Europe,[8] including in central and eastern Europe, where quotas were also delegitimised owing to their use under state socialism, there has been a move to introduce them and a shift from voluntary party quotas (adopted primarily by green, left and social-democratic parties), to legislated quotas that are binding for all political parties. For the 2014 European elections, more than a third of the 145 national parties surveyed in a European Parliament study imposed some form of gender quota and some parties also had quotas for ethnic minorities. For the 2019 European elections, legislated quotas applied in 11 countries (Belgium, Greece, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Slovenia).

Aside from gender quotas, when it comes to **ensuring that more women are elected**, provision of **targeted support and training to run for office, including equal access to campaign funding**, have been found to have a direct impact on women's success, especially since women have been shown to rely relatively more than men on party sponsorship and support. Here, governments can take steps to **create a conducive institutional framework**. In France and Portugal, regulations linking public funding to parties' levels of gender equality strengthened the role of women within political parties in the medium term and may have been one factor behind big increases in the number of women elected to parliament.

Once women are in elected office, parliaments can take a number of steps to ensure that the environment is 'woman-friendly', by changing androcentric working practices and combating harassment.

Specific recommendations for the European Parliament and the European elections

Research conducted following the 2014 elections concluded that findings on the impact of quotas were nuanced, but their use appeared to have had a positive effect on women's chances of being elected. It recommended that European political parties use their influence to encourage member parties to adopt quotas or zipping and that women's NGOs and other advocates of quotas and zipping should demonstrate the benefits of using these systems. A study for the 2019 elections stressed that, since there are fewer seats available in European than national elections, political parties play a particularly key role in promoting candidates, urging them to consider lists that will improve gender balance in the next Parliament. The European Electoral Act could also require quotas for European Parliament elections. This possibility was called for by Parliament, but rejected by the Council and not taken into account when the Act was reformed in 2018.

The influence of media coverage

Research on the influence of media coverage of women candidates and politicians, both globally and in Europe shows that under- and misrepresentation of women in media has a negative impact on women's aspirations and electoral success, but higher media visibility can help to get more women elected. Longitudinal analysis of European elections found that women candidates are under-reported in news media, and between 2004 and the 2014 elections, there was little improvement. Findings from eight 'new' EU Member States (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta and Poland) show that during the 2014 European elections, women got less attention than their male counterparts and below their relative share of those standing as Members of the European Parliament. Women were also four times more likely to have references made to their appearance, and less likely to be challenged on issues. Use of social media by women candidates was one factor that increased their visibility and coverage in other media. Crucially, where female candidates had higher visibility in the media, more women were elected. Higher media visibility would also shape future opportunities, by influencing women's decisions to run for office, political parties' choice of candidates and young people's perceptions of politics as a suitable career for women. Research using data from the Global Media Monitoring Project has found that, since individuals' ambitions are formed over long periods of time, sexist portrayals of women in everyday media reporting also stifle ambition among women who would be willing to stand as political candidates in a less sexist media environment.

Social media platforms such as Twitter can give women candidates and politicians a direct channel to reach the public and avoid gender-biased media coverage, but they can be far from 'women-friendly'. The IPU's 2016 survey of women parliamentarians confirms that, 'social media have become the number one place in which psychological violence – particularly in the form of sexist and misogynistic remarks, humiliating images, mobbing, intimidation and threats – is perpetrated against women parliamentarians'. Moreover, 60.5 % of the respondents said that such acts are 'strongly motivated by the clear-cut positions they had taken on particular issues' and that taking a stance on 'controversial subjects, such as defending women's rights and human rights in general' had made them particular targets of sexist behaviour and acts of violence.

International standards

The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, all set internationally recognised standards and targets for achieving equality between women and men in decision-making and participation in public life, and these apply to the EU Member States. In addition, the Council of Europe calls on governments to achieve balanced participation in political life (defined as achieving a minimum representation of 40 % of women and men) and urges local and regional authorities to encourage women to stand for election.

EU action on gender balance in political decision-making

In 2001, the European Parliament argued that women's inclusion in decision-making strengthens democracy and is a necessary condition for women's interests and concerns to be taken into account. In 2012, it welcomed the parity systems/gender quotas introduced in some Member States and urged others to consider legislating to facilitate gender balance in political decision-making. For the 2014 and 2019 European elections, it urged Member States and political parties to support gender-balanced electoral lists. Parliament has also called for measures to prevent and combat sexual harassment in political life, taken a strong position on the current backlash against women's rights and gender equality, targeted, inter alia, at the presence of women in decision-making positions, and called for a strong gender equality focus in the [current] term.

Since the 1990s, the EU has pursued the objective of promoting balanced participation of women and men in decision-making at local, regional and national levels as part of its broader commitment to gender equality.[9] The European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 includes this

as a priority objective. Action will include promoting women's participation as voters and candidates in the 2024 European elections, through funding and exchanges of best practices.

Spotlight on women and decision-making in the light of the coronavirus pandemic

The issue of women's participation in leadership and decision-making has come to the fore in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. The health, social and economic crisis is having a gendered impact, increasing incidences of gender-based violence, curbing access to essential sexual and reproductive health services, and seriously affecting women's livelihoods and opportunities. Conversely, there are concerns that policy responses have so far tended to be gender blind.

Lack of gender balance in decision-making

Some researchers have made a direct link between the paucity of gender-sensitive measures and a lack of gender parity in decision-making. Many EU Member States already had a lower proportion of women in senior levels of government and national administrations and now have a glaring lack of women in Covid-19 decision-making bodies. An analysis of 115 expert national Covid-19 task forces revealed that 85.2 % contained mostly men and a mere 3.5 % exhibit gender parity. The picture across the 15 EU Member States included in the survey (Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden) varied widely. In decision-making task forces, the proportion of women varied from 0 % in Lithuania, 6.7 % in Hungary and 8.3 % in Cyprus to 40.6 % in Ireland and 60 % in Austria. The proportion of women in expert groups tended to be higher. A further analysis of female representation in Covid-19 national response teams in France, Germany, and Finland also illustrated that women are systematically under-represented. In addition, it suggested that countries with more gender-balanced leadership are more likely to deliver responses that consider the impacts on women and girls and advance gender equality. Research for the European Commission also stresses the importance of including women's organisations in decision-making, as their knowledge of the situation on the ground can help to ensure that measures respond to women's needs.

Positive impacts of gender balance in decision-making

There are reports that female-led countries have generally fared better in terms of outcomes during the pandemic, although this has been greeted with mixed reactions. There is a widespread perception that countries led by women have suffered lower death rates.[10] Some sources have pointed to a gendered divergence in men and women's policy choices; a report published by the Centre for Economic Policy Research and the World Economic Forum pointed to the 'proactive and coordinated policy response' adopted by female leaders. Women Heads of Government in Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland and New Zealand were recognised for the rapidity of their responses with measures designed to 'flatten the curve'. Many decisions had been calibrated meticulously prior to actual implementation, and people had been well-informed of the rationale behind tough measures, showing less reluctance to cooperate and accommodate. Research indicates that female politicians are also perceived to be more empathetic, compassionate and trustworthy than their male counterparts, and many female leaders were praised for their transparent and compassionate communication of fact-based public health information. Looking forward, academics have noted that positive attitudes towards female leaders' responses to the pandemic may indicate a forthcoming increase in political support for female candidates.

> In January 2021, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution on the gender perspective in the Covid-19 crisis and post-crisis period, which stresses that women and women's organisations must play a central role in decision-making to ensure that their perspectives and needs are taken into account in designing, implementing and monitoring recovery measures at local, regional, national and EU levels. Parliament also called for a dedicated forum to be set up in the Council to ensure that gender equality is discussed at the highest level and mainstreamed effectively.

ENDNOTES

[1] The next annual report on gender equality in the European Parliament is due to be published on 9 March 2021.

[2] For further information on what kinds of disaggregated equality data are collected for sexual orientation, gender identity and racial and ethnic origin in the EU Member States, see the reports issued by the European Commission in 2017.

[3] D. L. Rhode, *Women in Leadership*, 2017.

[4] Ibid.

[5] For European elections, proportional representation applies in all EU countries, but they can use either open or closed lists. For details, see 2019 European elections: National rules, EPRS, European Parliament, 2018.

[6] European political parties are pan-European political parties formed by members of national political parties with similar political standpoints and manifestos, which campaign during European Parliament elections and have been assessed as having significant power within the European Parliament and the European Council.

[7] M. Bruter and S. Harrison, *The future of our democracies: Young party members in Europe*, Palgrave, 2009.

[8] For EU Member States where some form of gender quotas are in use (i.e. all except Denmark, Estonia, Latvia and Finland), further details for European, national and sub-national levels, as applicable, are available on the International IDEA gender quota database.

[9] For a detailed historical overview, see for example 'Gendering political representation in the European Union' in J. Kantola, *Gender and the European Union*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 50-75.

[10] G. Tett, Have Countries Led By Women Coped Better with Covid-19?, *Financial Times*, 2 December 2020. See also S. Purkayastha, 'Are Women Leaders Significantly Better at Controlling the Contagion During the Covid-19 Pandemic?', June 2020.

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