

# Achieving balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making: a gender equality and democratic requirement



Council of Europe  
Gender Equality Strategy

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



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**T**ruly democratic institutions should reflect the diversity of the population and address the needs of all. Balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making is a key indicator of gender equality and women's full enjoyment of their human rights, a condition for equality, social justice and cohesion. In 2003, the Council of Europe adopted Recommendation Rec(2003)3 on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making. Governments of the member states committed themselves to achieve a minimum representation of 40% of women and men in political and public life, through legislative, administrative and supportive measures, and to adopt indicators to measure progress.

## Women's participation and the glass ceiling

In most Council of Europe member states, the full and equal participation of women in political and public life, including in legislative, executive, judicial, diplomatic and administrative bodies at the local, regional and national level is still below the minimum target of 40%. While women constitute half of the population and half of the voters, they continue to be under-represented in all political and public decision-making processes and positions. Women represent only a quarter of decision-makers in most fields of power.

## Key facts and figures from the 2017 Council of Europe analytical report on balanced participation of women and men in decision-making (data 2016)

### Legislative power

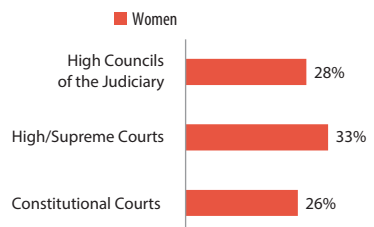
The average percentage of women's representation in national lower/single houses was 25.6% in 2016. Only two countries reached the 40% minimum target and five others followed closely at 39%.

### Executive power

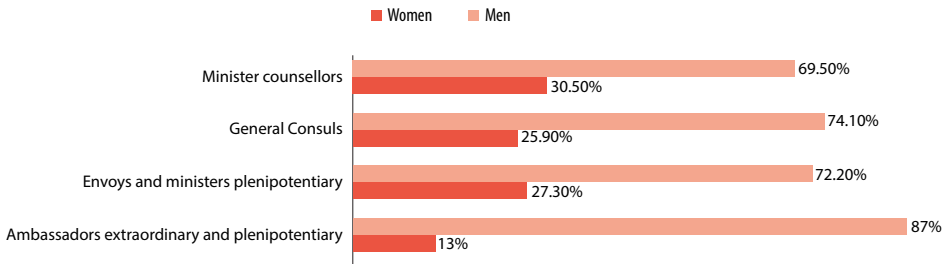
While the number of women heads of state elected by citizens has decreased since 2015 (9.5% in 2016), there has been an increase in the number of women heads of state appointed by parliaments (14.3%). In 2016, the average percentage of women senior and junior ministers was 22.4% and the average percentage of women in regional governments was 31.4%. At the local level, the percentage of women mayors was extremely low (13.4%), while on average 26% of municipality councillors were women.

### Judicial power

Despite a positive evolution regarding women in High/Supreme Courts and Constitutional Courts, very few countries reached the 40% minimum target.



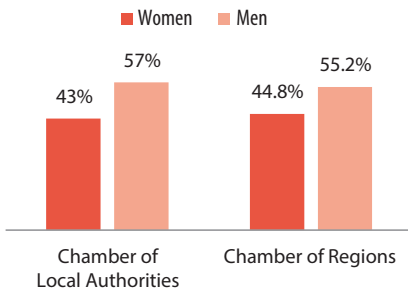
## Diplomatic service



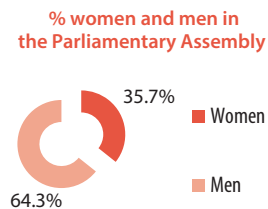
There is a strong glass ceiling in the diplomatic sector. The highest percentage of women (30.5%) was found in the lowest grade (minister counsellors), while only 13% of women held the highest grade positions: ambassadors extraordinary and plenipotentiary. In most countries, the average participation of women in all four categories was below 20%.

## Council of Europe

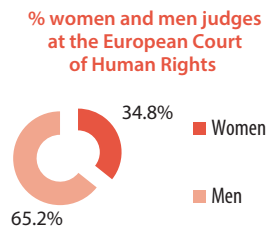
Both Chambers of the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities had moved beyond the targeted 40% in 2016: the Chamber of Local Authorities had on average 43% women and the Chamber of Regional Authorities had 44.8%.



The average percentage of women representatives and substitutes to the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly was 35.7%.



With an average of 34.8% of women judges, the European Court of Human Rights remained below the 40% minimum target. The Presidency of the Court continued to be a male dominated area.



## Parity: still a distant goal...

■ Parity is still a distant goal for all aspects of political and public decision-making. While women and men may have equal rights to be candidates to an election or a post, the everyday reality of gender inequalities leads to unequal opportunities.

■ Deeply rooted mentality, and traditional unequal power relations, socio-economic and cultural barriers, as well as the prevalence sexist language and gender-based violence, continue to limit women's participation in political and public spheres. Access to political and public processes can be even more challenging for women confronted with multiple forms of discrimination based on: age, disability, ethnicity or social origin. Politics and decision-making processes continue to be seen as male arenas and women's participation is often treated as a "women's issue". This leads to discriminatory practices, sexism and gender-based stereotypes among politicians, the media and the public. It influences women and girls' own perception of their capabilities to stand for office and discourages their aspirations. Even when progress is made, the Council of Europe report illustrates that progress in this field is not linear and that a backlash is always possible.

■ As a male-dominated arena, it is harder for women to find support and gain access to closed political circles and networks and to funds. The functioning of political life, its rites and rhythms, continue to follow unwritten, traditional rules which, still too often, tend to favour "old boys networks". Due to an unequal share of responsibilities between women and men in private life, a politician's traditional work schedule and culture have been shaped around male behaviour and life experience, adding difficulties for women. Things are no different for leadership positions in trade unions, employment organisations and public bodies. The deep-rooted obstacles to increased women's political participation are linked to educational, social and cultural factors that still tend to consider the public/political domain as mainly a male domain.

## The way forward: overcoming barriers to achieve balanced participation of women and men in decision-making

■ The full participation of women in public and political life requires fundamental changes to remove both societal and structural barriers. While obstacles are numerous, changes need to come from a comprehensive multi-sectoral approach involving all relevant stakeholders. For example, education and the media have important roles to play in opening and presenting a variety of opportunities for girls and boys, in challenging gender stereotypes and sexism, as well as in presenting realistic and unbiased portrayal and images of women in political and public decision-making positions.

## Recommended actions

- ▶ Ensure political will, commitment and communication at high level, followed by the implementation of targeted, achievable and measurable policy, legislative and other actions.
- ▶ Adopt gender equality legislation and policies and ensure the mainstreaming of gender equality in all areas of public and private life, followed by effective implementation.
- ▶ Ensure the allocation of sufficient funds and strengthen gender equality mechanisms responsible for implementing gender equality policies.
- ▶ Ensure the exemplarity and transparency of public administration and justice systems.
- ▶ Integrate gender equality in legal frameworks for political parties and in laws on their public funding.
- ▶ Consider setting gender quota laws and/or parity systems (i.e. with a high quota percentage, rank order rules, strict sanctions for non-compliance and mandatory replacement of a woman resigning from a list by another woman).
- ▶ Consider the advantages of proportional electoral systems.
- ▶ Consider the limitation of electoral posts held simultaneously.
- ▶ Train political party leaders, executives and bodies responsible for the selection of candidates for elections to address gender biases and sexism in the functioning, recruitment and selection practices, including by adopting strong voluntary political party quotas and transparent internal selection mechanisms.
- ▶ Train and support women candidates before and after their elections.
- ▶ Adopt policies to achieve gender equality in the media coverage of electoral campaigns aimed at enhancing women's visibility in such campaigns and their access to the media.
- ▶ Build partnerships and co-operation with gender equality experts and women's rights organisations.
- ▶ Commit to the United Nations "Planet 50-50 by 2030" campaign.
- ▶ Collect and disseminate good practices from political parties on candidate selection processes as well as on policy and legislative measures that encourage women's participation in decision making.
- ▶ Continue the regular monitoring of the implementation of Recommendation Rec(2003)3 on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making and ensure the visibility and dissemination of data and good practices in member states.

■ The **following indicators** should be used to measure progress by member states:

- ▶ the percentage of women and men on political parties candidate lists (“sure seats”);
- ▶ the percentage of women and men elected representatives in parliaments (supra-national/national/federal/regional) and local assemblies, according to political party;
- ▶ the percentage of women and men elected representatives in parliaments (supra-national/national) compared to the number of candidates, according to political party;
- ▶ the percentage of women and men in national delegations of the Council of Europe’s Parliamentary Assembly and Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, and to international organisations and fora;
- ▶ the percentage of women and men in national, federal and regional governments;
- ▶ the number of women and men senior and junior ministers in the different fields of action (portfolios/ministries) of the national, federal and regional governments of the member states;
- ▶ the percentage of the highest ranking women and men civil servants and their distribution in different fields of action;
- ▶ the percentage of women and men judges in the Supreme Court;
- ▶ the percentage of women and men in bodies appointed by the government;
- ▶ the percentage of women and men in the decision-making bodies of political parties at national level;
- ▶ the percentage of women and men members of employer, labour and professional organisations and the percentage of women and men in their decision-making bodies at national level.

## Council of Europe standards and publications

### *Committee of Ministers*

- ▶ Recommendation Rec(2003)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making, adopted on 12 March 2003 and explanatory memorandum
- ▶ Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy 2014-2017 and Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023 include a strategic objective on achieving balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making. The Gender Equality Commission regularly takes stock of progress and prepares an annual report on the implementation of the Strategy.
- ▶ Council of Europe Plan of action on strengthening judicial independence and impartiality (April 2016)

### *Parliamentary Assembly*

- ▶ Resolution 2111(2016) on assessing the impact of measures to improve women’s political representation
- ▶ Resolution 1898(2012) on political parties and women’s political representation
- ▶ Resolution 1706(2010) on increasing women’s representation in politics through the electoral system
- ▶ Resolution 1489 (2006) on mechanisms to ensure women’s participation in decision-making

### *Congress of Local and Regional Authorities*

- ▶ Recommendation 390(2016) on women's political participation and representation at local and regional levels
- ▶ Charter of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (2011)

### *Reports and studies*

- ▶ Analytical report on the third round of monitoring on the implementation of CM Recommendation Rec(2003)3 on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making (September 2017, with 2016 data)
- ▶ Study on media coverage of elections with a specific focus on gender equality, Steering Committee on Media and Information Society (December 2017)
- ▶ Regional study on women's political representation in the Eastern Partnership countries (April 2017)
- ▶ Report on women's political participation and representation at local and regional levels, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (October 2016)
- ▶ European judicial systems – Efficiency and quality of justice (CEPEJ Studies No. 23, Edition 2016, with 2014 data)
- ▶ Report on the method of nomination of candidates within political parties, Council for Democratic Elections and Venice Commission (June 2015)
- ▶ See also, the Council of Europe webpage on achieving balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making

## **International references**

### *United Nations*

- ▶ United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015). Goal 5: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls"; Target 5.5: "Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life"
- ▶ UN Women – Planet 50-50 by 2030: Step It Up for Gender Equality (2015)
- ▶ CEDAW Committee General Recommendation No. 23: Political and public life (1997)
- ▶ Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)
- ▶ United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)
- ▶ United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)
- ▶ United Nations Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952)

### *Inter-Parliamentary Union*

- ▶ Women in national parliaments (2017)
- ▶ Plan of action for gender-sensitive parliaments (2012)
- ▶ Gender-sensitive parliaments: a global review of good practice (2011)

### *Others*

- ▶ International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics (iKNOW Politics) created by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Women
- ▶ Gqual Campaign – Campaign for gender parity in positions involving international representation, including international tribunals and bodies, human rights bodies, Special Procedures, and regional and international organisations.





“Member states should recognise publicly that the equal sharing of decision-making power between women and men of different background and ages strengthens and enriches democracy.”

*Recommendation Rec(2003)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making*

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