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Equality and diversity in public representation – the participation of young people, women and ethnic and social groups as members of parliament

Background document

Dignity and equality are the foundation of modern European societies. We acknowledge the need to ensure equality and combat any kind of discrimination and the important role the Organisation plays in this regard. We therefore commit to strengthening work towards inclusive societies without marginalisation, exclusion, racism and intolerance. In this regard, we will use an intersectional approach in the work of the Council of Europe to address the multiple discriminations faced by people and groups in vulnerable and marginalised situations.

We recall that gender equality and the full, equal and effective participation of women in public and private decision-making processes are essential to the rule of law, democracy and sustainable development.

***Reykjavík Declaration,
4th Summit of Council of Europe Heads of State and Government***

Ensure FULL, EQUAL AND MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL AND PUBLIC LIFE for all, in particular for women and girls, free from violence, fear, harassment, hate speech and hate crime, as well as discrimination based on any ground.

Principle 10, Reykjavík Principles for Democracy

Introduction

Throughout Europe, large parts of the electorate lack trust in elected institutions. Parliaments are criticised for being distant, not understanding people's real concerns and not being representative of the population. Women, persons with disabilities, visible minorities, young women and men, people with an immigration background and LGBTI people still remain poorly represented in politics at local, regional, national and European levels. Parliaments must also be places where all representatives feel safe and equal, and where they can express themselves without being subjected to discrimination, hostility or stigmatisation.

The Council of Europe has constantly encouraged the full and meaningful participation of everyone in public life, with particular emphasis on young people and women, as well as on under-represented ethnic and social groups and minorities. The Parliamentary Assembly's recommendations to parliaments on how to increase their representativeness through positive outreach and action include calls for equal treatment, inclusive practices and the elimination of sexism, racism and discrimination in parliaments, as well as for the adaptation of infrastructure, working patterns and methods to enable broad participation that accommodates diversity.

What can parliaments do to fulfil the commitments taken at the Reykjavik Summit and ensure more inclusive and diverse representation in national parliaments?

Women as legislators and political leaders

Women's equal participation in parliaments at national and local levels is crucial to improving the representative nature, accountability and quality of democracies, and the inclusiveness of our democracies is essential to their sustainable governance. The tenth and last Reykjavik Principle for Democracy adopted at the Fourth Summit of Heads of State and Government in May 2023 echoes the Parliamentary Assembly's work on equal participation, which led to adopted texts such as [Resolution 2386 \(2021\)](#) on enhancing participation of women from under-represented groups in political and public decision making. New focus should be given to this dimension of equality, in co-operation with other international organisations as recommended by the Heads of State and Government at the Fourth Summit.

Eliminating sexism and discrimination based on gender from parliaments remains an urgent need: the Parliamentary Assembly's joint study with the Interparliamentary Union in 2018 revealed the extent to which women in parliaments are more exposed than men to physical and psychological violence, including online, problems which are often compounded by other obstacles, such as parenthood and family care, still more the responsibility of women. The #NotInMyParliament campaign against sexism launched in 2018 by former Assembly President Liliane Maury Pasquier was part of the follow-up to this work.

Disengagement of young people

The lack of confidence in the work of parliaments already pinpointed above is accentuated in young Europeans. Perceived inaction (or all-too-slow progress) on issues of concern for present and future generations, such as protection of the environment and the promotion of fairer and more equal societies, increase the frustration and resulting disinterest demonstrated by a large majority of the youth of today. Political engagement is exercised by a very small minority of young people, is often polarised towards the extremes, and activities are often carried out in open opposition to established institutions.

Participation of minorities

Article 15 of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities obliges states parties to ensure the effective participation of persons belonging to national in public affairs. In recent reports, the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention has observed that in many states, national minorities are afforded institutionalised participation in decision-making either directly through allocated seats in parliament, or indirectly through consultative mechanisms, or both. Good practices in this field should be promoted, as the effective participation of minorities in public affairs is both a human rights obligation and a strong guarantee of democratic security.

LGBTI people are still significantly underrepresented in politics, and this is even more the case for trans people and women from the LGBTI community. Many LGBTI people who do participate actively in politics feel unsafe to be open about their sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics, due to the high levels of hate speech, threats and acts of violence that may be directed against them.

Political parties and parliaments are also, all too often, not adapted to participation by persons with disabilities. While efforts are often made to make public buildings more accessible to persons with reduced mobility, sign language is rarely used in national parliaments, for example, and much more needs to be done to enable effective participation by persons with vision impairments. Legislation and the functioning of public institutions should also be made available in easy-to-read versions. The inclusion in political life of persons with disabilities must be understood holistically and be addressed at every level, from political parties to public institutions and parliaments.

According to the over 30 replies from parliaments to a questionnaire on "Promoting inclusive participation in parliamentary and political life" submitted in 2022 by the Assembly through the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD), parliamentarians are aware of the need for inclusive practices and infrastructure as a democratic requirement and have taken certain measures, although hard data on measures and results is hard to gather. Most national parliaments have a code of conduct for parliamentarians with general provisions prohibiting discriminatory practices,

as well as ethical guidelines about respectful behaviour, but very few explicitly mention sexism or sexual harassment. In most national parliaments, there is a body or officer responsible for implementation and monitoring of non-discriminatory practices. Overall, respondents considered that "a lot remains to be done on a wider, societal level" and that "politics, traditions and customs" were obstacles.

Moving forward

The time has come to take a holistic approach and look at the issues of diversity, equality and inclusion across the board, in order to ensure that parliaments and other elected institutions fully reflect the complex diversity of European societies. More diversity in politics would be beneficial for the political system as a whole, enhancing its democratic legitimacy and representativeness. It would also contribute to preventing and combating discrimination and negative stereotyping throughout society by setting good examples.

In this endeavour, when it comes to more equitable gender representation, the burden of enhancing participation should not be borne only by women, but by society as a whole. Institutions and political parties need to make space for women to engage and commit. It is also the responsibility of men to allow and promote change, and to show themselves as allies for gender equality. Profound structural changes are needed to ensure more participation, equality and inclusiveness in political and public decision making. These begin with small infrastructural adaptations, such as family rooms and childcare facilities in parliaments, allowing MPs and parliamentary staff to achieve work-life balance by reconciling their legislative work and family responsibilities, and continue with alterations to participatory procedures through facilitation of voting in various ways, including timing and partnering.

Networks of parliamentarians are a strong influence for positive change and champions are needed to inspire and push for progress. The Assembly's No Hate Parliamentary Alliance recently adopted a new Charter of Political Parties for a Non-Racist and Inclusive Society, to encourage political parties to commit themselves publicly and visibly to abolishing racism and inequality from among their ranks.

Questions for discussion

- How can national parliaments foster a positive environment for equal and diverse representation?
- What can be done to implement codes of conduct and guidelines on respect and inclusive treatment in parliaments?
- What should be done to encourage better representation at grass roots levels as a "bottom-up" approach?
- What more should the Council of Europe, and in particular the Parliamentary Assembly, be doing to promote more inclusive participation at all levels?

Appendix: key reference documents

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

[Resolution 2443 \(2022\)](#) “The role of political parties in fostering diversity and inclusion: a new charter for a non-racist society”

[Revised Charter of European political parties for a non-racist and inclusive society](#) (Appendix to Doc.15535)

[Resolution 2394 \(2021\)](#) “Gender representation in the Parliamentary Assembly”

[Resolution 2386 \(2021\)](#) “Enhancing participation of women from under-represented groups in political and public decision making”

[Resolution 2351 \(2020\)](#) “The gender dimension of foreign policy”

[Resolution 2274 \(2019\)](#) and [Recommendation 2152 \(2019\)](#) “Promoting parliaments free of sexism and sexual harassment”

[Resolution 2222 \(2018\)](#) “Promoting diversity and equality in politics”

Council of Europe

4th Council of Europe Summit, [United around our values – Reykjavík Declaration](#), 2023.

Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

[Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life](#)

[Youth participation](#)

Other

[Interparliamentary Union research on women in politics](#)

[Interparliamentary Union research on youth participation](#)