

Gender Balance in Elected Office in Europe – Lenita Freidenvall

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I have been asked to give a short presentation on gender balance in elected office, with a focus on national elected bodies among EU member states.

So, I will talk about: What, why and how!

- What is the status of equal representation of women and men in elected office today?
- Why do we not have gender balance in elected office?
- How can we address the continued lack of gender balance in elected office?

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First of all, we need to underline that gender balance should not be a problem.

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the government of his/her country.
- The Beijing Platform for Action, celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, states that achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning.
- It calls on governments to “Take measures to ensure women’s equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making.”
- The EUs Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 has a “vision of a Europe where women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, are equal – where they are free to pursue their chosen path in life, where they have equal opportunities to thrive, and where they can equally participate in and lead our European society.”
- So there is consensus among international organizations and the EU and its MSs that gender balance is to be promoted.

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What is the status of gender balance in elected office today?

There are at least two possible narratives: the negative and the positive.

I start with the negative narrative: A hundred years ago, women across the EU made historic gains — they won the right to vote and to stand for election, and they held pioneering positions in national decision-making bodies. A century later, the composition of parliamentary assemblies often fails to reflect the gender diversity of the population they represent, with women usually significantly under-represented in politics, and men – as a consequence – over-represented.

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On a more positive note: The proportion of women in national parliaments (single/lower house) across the 28 EU Member States has gradually increased: from 21 % in 2005 to an all-time high of 30 % in 2018.

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But mixed results can be noted:

- Parliaments in Sweden, Finland, Spain, Belgium, Denmark, France and Portugal are gender balanced (i.e. at least 40 % of each gender),
- whereas women account for less than 20 % of parliamentarians in Malta and Hungary.
- So we have frontrunners and laggards!

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Women's representation in EU-28 as of 2020 (statistics from IPU).

- Only seven Member States have at least 40 % women among their MPs in the national parliament (Sweden, Finland, Spain, Belgium, Portugal, Denmark and France),
- while in 17 Member States, women do not even account for one in three (33 %) of those holding parliamentary seats
- [Since 2015 progress has been made in France, Romania, and Bulgaria.
- Gains, but lower gains, were made in Austria, Cyprus and Estonia, Ireland, Italy and Portugal, and Poland and the United Kingdom.
- The share of women in parliament declined in Croatia, Germany, Greece, and Lithuania.]
- In sum, the status of women's representation in politics can most likely be found in the middle of these two narratives – the % is increasing, but decline in numbers also takes place.

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Why do we not have gender balance in elected office? Or, more specifically, why do patterns differ?

This is a huge research questions, I cannot account for the immense literature in this field.

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But, some conclusions can be made: the electoral systems differ, the party set-ups differ, and the formal rules of women in politics differ: some countries have legislated gender quotas (such as Spain and Belgium), in some countries party quotas have been adopted by some parties (Austria, Germany), in some countries there are strong norms on gender balance (Finland and Sweden).

Importantly: Political parties often act as gatekeepers against gender equality since they set party policy and select candidates for election. And, conversely, political parties also act as door openers, since they have the power to select women candidates to represent them in elections.

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How can we address the continued lack of gender-balance in elected office?

A number of Member States have taken initiatives to improve the gender balance in their parliaments.

Legislative Gender Quotas: are currently in place in 10 Member States: Belgium, Croatia, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain.

- With the exception of Croatia, women's representation has improved since the adoption of a quota system.
- However, an equivalent (or almost) proportion of elected members of parliament has only been reached in Portugal and Spain.
- In all other cases, disparities between the quota target and women in parliament remain: [8 p.p. in Ireland and Poland; 11 p.p. in Belgium and Slovenia; 13 p.p. in France and Greece; 15 p.p. in Italy (18); and more than 20 p.p. in Croatia.]

Party Quotas: have been adopted by individual political parties in EU member states.

- This measure is common among Social Democratic Parties, Green Parties, Left Parties, and can be found in Austria, Germany, Sweden, etc.

No quotas: In some countries no quota system is in place, Finland and Denmark

Other formal rules – soft measures - are also available: such as voluntary goals and recommendations adopted by political parties to promote gender balance.

- These measures are voluntary. They have often been adopted by parties to the right or at the centre.
- Interestingly, all of the parties in Sweden, except for the populist party, have adopted formal rules on women in elected bodies, ranging from general goals and recommendations to party quotas. In total, seven different rules were adopted by the seven different parties.

In addition, there are also **other non-quota measures** available:

- For instance, at the CSO level: examples are: Raising awareness, recruitment initiatives, training programs, fund-raising networks
- At the political party level: examples are: women's sections, recruitment initiatives, capacity building, campaign funding

There are pros and cons with all these measures.

- Legislative gender quotas are the most efficient and fast strategy, provided that they are sanctions for non-compliance. They cover all parties, also those with room for improvement.

- Party quotas are as effective as legislative quotas, and could be a solution in countries where legislation is not an option, but where parties to the left are strong, like Social Democratic Parties, Left Parties and Green Parties.
- Other measures, such as voluntary goals and recommendations, could also be an option, especially if quotas are controversial, or where parties agree on the goal, but not on the means to reach this goal. However, these measures could lead to high levels of women elected, but they may also lead to fluctuations in the numbers of women elected, since they are voluntary.

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Measures in Sweden

While there is no legislative gender quotas, all parties – from the left to the right – have adopted some kind of policy on equal representation of women and men in elected office, ranging from party quotas, to recommendations and general goals.

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Generally, in Sweden there is a strong norm on gender balance in elected office, but also a strong norm that it is up to party districts to decide on whom to represent them. This is the major reason why soft policies, and not legislative gender quotas, have been the preferred solution.

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Also in public administration and in business, soft policies have been adopted: There is a soft policy of gender balance in the boards of government agencies, in commissions of inquiry appointed by Gvmt, in the boards of state-owned companies.

Equal distribution of power and influence is one of the national gender equality objectives.

Cabinets have been gender balanced since the 1990s, although there are no rules about this.

One strategy practiced by the Government is: leading by example: If the Government can do its part, also political parties and private enterprise can do their parts.

Interestingly, this leadership role is complemented by a strong norm in the Swedish society on gender balance in decision-making bodies and by a strong civil society, including women's organisations (and also media) that keep this norm alive.