

# Women in local and regional government

## Still a long way from achieving parity

### SUMMARY

Local and regional institutions have direct impacts on the everyday lives of their citizens. They are vital for women's empowerment, being both the level of governance responsible for service delivery and a potential stepping-stone to a career in public office at national and European level. When their own decision-making bodies are fully representative, the interests and experiences of multiple groups are included. Therefore, the equal representation of women and men at all levels of local governance is a democratic imperative. After all, women form half the population and need to be better represented in power structures.

The representation of women in local and regional assemblies across the EU continues to improve, albeit at a slow rate. However, a number of social, political and institutional obstacles hinder the involvement of women in regional and local government structures. As data show, progress towards equal representation in local and regional government remains slow. Furthermore, progress cannot be taken for granted: in certain EU countries, previous achievements have been reversed.

A number of structural and societal barriers continue to hinder women from seeking office and from fulfilling their mandates or accessing leadership positions. In order to boost female representation in local/regional structures, various local and regional strategies have been adopted.

The European Union has been a staunch advocate of women's participation in decision-making at all levels of governance. Gender equality is one of the founding values of the European Union, as can be seen in Article 2 and in Article 3, paragraph 3, of the Treaty on European Union. Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) also reiterates that one of the EU's missions is the elimination of inequalities and the promotion of equality between women and men in all its actions. The European Parliament has adopted a number of resolutions supporting gender balance measures in political decision-making. Nevertheless, laws determining local and regional participation fall within the remit of the EU Member States.

*This is an updated and expanded edition of an ['At a glance' note](#) from March 2019.*



#### In this Briefing

- State of play
- Obstacles to gender balance
- Local and regional strategies to boost the electability of women
- EU institutions, advisory bodies and stakeholders
- European Parliament

## State of play

According to 2019 [data](#) published by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), the proportion of women members and presidents of regional assemblies reached one-third (33.5 %) of the total elected members. At the local level, EIGE [data](#) show that in 2019, women mayors or other leaders and members of local and municipal councils in the EU-28 accounted for 32.6 %. The percentages of women representatives at the local and regional level are similar to those of EU national assemblies (32.2 %), but far below the proportion of women at the European Parliament (39.5 %). Progress has been slow: for instance, 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 modest upward trend should not be taken for granted: in certain EU countries, previous achievements in representation have been reversed.

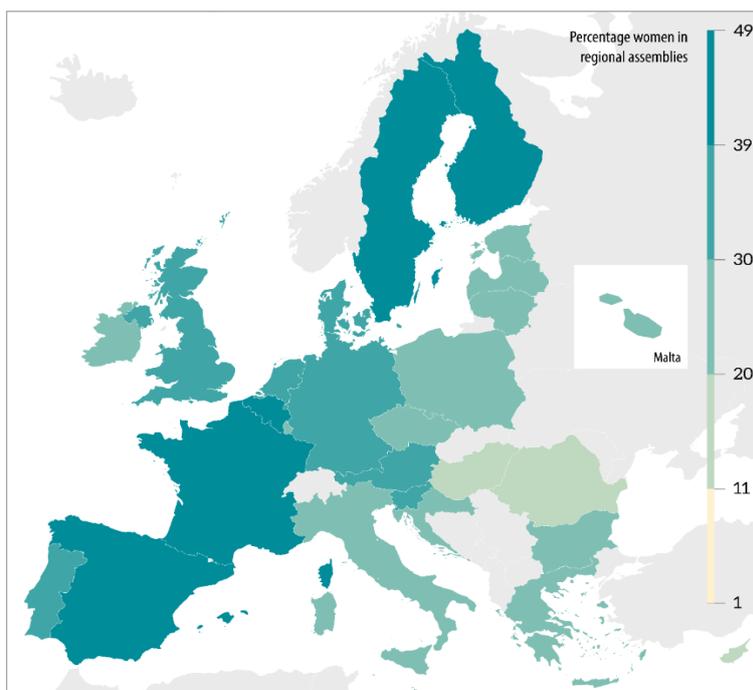
Certain EU countries have higher percentages of women elected in local/regional governments than others. In

2019, the EU countries with the highest levels of participation were (in descending order): Sweden, France, Finland, Belgium, Spain, Latvia, Slovenia, Denmark and the Netherlands. Map 1 shows the percentage of women in regional assemblies.

In some countries, such as Sweden, the share of women in local/regional government has increased without the need for a legislated gender quota. In Belgium, France, Spain and Portugal quotas had been used to raise the number of women at the national and/or regional level of government. Overall, Nordic countries and countries with mandatory quotas tend to score better when it comes to the number of locally/regionally elected women. Nevertheless, no country has reached parity at the local level.

When it comes to leadership of local and regional governments, women are even more under-represented. According to a Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) [study](#) of 41 European countries, only 15.4 % of mayors are women. The proportion of women mayors remains much lower than that of women elected to municipal councils. Nevertheless, the same study concludes that a number of Central European countries have been quite successful in increasing their proportion of women mayors. Furthermore, various women have been elected mayors in various EU capitals (such as Paris, Madrid, Amsterdam, Bucharest, Luxembourg, Rome, Sofia and Stockholm). The same observation also applies to regional leadership, as there are fewer women presidents of regions than women elected to the regional assemblies.

Map 1 – Percentage of Women in regional assemblies, 2019



Source: EIGE, 2019. For EU countries without regional assemblies (BG, CY, EE, IE, LT, LU, MT and SI), the number of women in the local assemblies is shown).

## Obstacles to gender balance

According to an EPRS [briefing](#), structural and societal barriers continue to hinder women from seeking office and from fulfilling their mandates or accessing leadership positions. 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 negative reactions, which remain a barrier to women wishing to enter 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 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.

## Local and regional strategies to boost the electability of women

According to a CEMR [study](#), 14 European countries had introduced mandatory quotas at local level, seven of which are EU Members. France and Belgium are the only ones to have introduced parity. With respect to the effectiveness of these quotas, between 2008 and today, these fourteen countries increased their proportion of women elected at the local level from 22.8 % to 31.5 % (i.e. an increase of 8.7 %), whereas in the countries without quotas, this proportion rose from 23.7 % to 27.7 % (+4 %) over the same period.

In its [European Charter for equality of women and men in local life](#), the CEMR makes recommendations on improving women's participation in local politics. The Charter has been translated into 28 languages and signed by nearly 2 000 local and regional governments in 35 European countries.

Various strategies can be deployed to improve women's lives in municipalities and regions. The Urbact programme published a [report](#) on gender-equal cities, in which it makes recommendations on a number of issues that also lie within the remit of local and regional government (e.g. participation, governance, equality, public services, planning and public space and migrant integration). It states that current research shows that a more equal share of women in power is linked to better government, and that female achievement boosts Gross Domestic Product. It also claims that representation creates a ripple effect: women and minority groups are more likely to become politically active, vote in elections and raise their voices when they feel represented.

A 2016 Council of Europe [report](#) claims that overall, women are not particularly better represented in regional parliaments, which usually tend to be newer institutions compared to national parliaments. The report claims that changing older institutions through the establishment of a gender-balance approach seems neither more nor less difficult than changing new institutions. It concludes that, if well designed, gender-quota legislation or parity systems are effective tools to establish gender balance in political decision-making. In order to be effective, such measures need to be complemented with additional practical measures.

A European Women's Lobby [note](#) on women in politics suggests that women have less confidence to put themselves forward for election; once they do, they often struggle to get an electable spot on the election list. The note further states that sexism is still rampant in politics and that women

are often not welcome. When women do run for election, their campaigns often receive less funding than those of their male counterparts. In addition, across the EU, women spend double the amount of time on childcare compared to men.

## EU institutions, advisory bodies and stakeholders

Local and regional participation falls within the remit of the EU Member States. Nevertheless, equality among women and men is a fundamental right and a core European value that is enshrined in the legal and political framework of the EU. The EU's commitment to gender equality in decision-making was further reinforced by the European Commission's [Strategic engagement for gender equality 2016-2019](#), which listed the promotion of gender equality in decision-making as a priority area of action. A [new strategy](#) is due to be adopted at the beginning of March, and will [maintain](#) the focus on equality in decision-making. Similarly, the Council's [European Pact for gender equality 2011-2020](#) seeks to promote women's empowerment in political and economic life. Moreover, to strengthen the promotion of gender equality and raise EU citizens' awareness of gender equality, the EU founded the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) in 2006. To further promote the participation of women in EU-funded programmes, many EU funds cover aspects related to [gender mainstreaming](#).

In April 2019, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) Bureau adopted a [strategy](#) for the gender-balanced participation of CoR Members with various recommendations.

## European Parliament

In 2012, Parliament 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 at European, national and regional level. It asked for the application of rank-ordering rules to electoral candidate lists for regional, national and EU elections, and for the definition and enforcement of effective sanctions for non-compliance. It called on Member States to link and set targets for political parties, based on parity between sexes, as a prerequisite for funding. In 2017, the Parliament also stressed the [importance of supporting the participation of women in decision-making in rural areas](#) by means of training activities designed to encourage their presence in sectors in which they are under-represented. In addition, a [study](#) for Parliament's Regional Development Committee made a number of recommendations for improving gender equality and gender mainstreaming in EU funded programmes.

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