

Women in politics: A global perspective

Fair representation of women in political life has a positive impact on gender mainstreaming in various policies. The United Nations has set a dedicated target within the sustainable development goals dealing specifically with women's access to leadership. The available data on the presence of women in parliaments and in governments show a positive trend, but much still remains to be done to ensure an equal presence of both genders in decision-making. The European Union supports gender equality in politics, and the European Parliament has reaffirmed the importance of such a policy on various occasions.

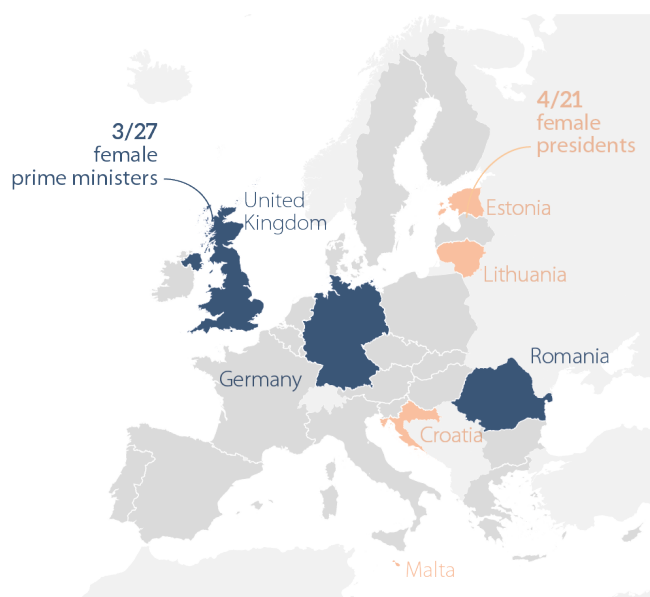
Fair political representation for women: a global objective

Experts agree that much depends on women being involved on [an equal footing](#) in political leadership as well as corporate governance. Women in decision-making positions play a crucial role in mainstreaming gender in all policy areas. However, in most societies around the world, women hold only a minority of decision-making positions in both public and private institutions. Yet for the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women ([UN Women](#)), women's political participation is a fundamental prerequisite for gender equality and genuine democracy.

In September 2015, the United Nations (UN) adopted the resolution '[2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)', which includes 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs). [SDG 5](#) specifically addresses gender equality. Advancing women's political participation is crucial for delivering on the SDGs, which is why the fifth target under SDG 5 aims to 'ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life'. The UN uses two indicators as benchmarks for progress: (1) the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments; and (2) the proportion of women in managerial positions.

Data on women in politics: the EU and the world

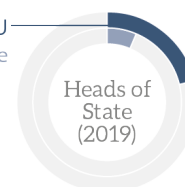
Worldwide, women are still under-represented in leadership positions. Female [heads of state or government](#) are still a minority, although the number has increased (from 12 to [21](#)) over the past 20 years. Currently, only approximately one in four members of lower or single houses of parliament worldwide is a woman. Globally, women's membership of parliaments rose to [24.1 %](#) at the end of 2018, representing an increase of 13 percentage points compared with [two decades ago](#). In 2018, the number of [women presiding](#) over houses of national parliaments was [55](#) (of the 279 posts worldwide). Similarly, only 18 % of appointed ministers are women, and they are usually assigned portfolios related to environment, natural resources, and energy, followed by social sectors. This means that women are still [largely excluded](#) from the executive branches of government. They are also under-represented among senior-level civil servants, and seldom represent their governments at international level. A number of factors appear to contribute to this under-representation: women are seldom leaders of major political parties, which are instrumental in forming future political leaders. Gender norms and expectations also drastically reduce the pool of women putting themselves forward for selection as electoral candidates.



18%

FEMALE LEADERS OF MAJOR POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE EU MEMBER STATES

With 3 women prime ministers, 4 women presidents and 2 queens (UK and Denmark), among the 55 heads of state and government in the EU, women's participation in political leadership in the EU is above the world average at the beginning of 2019.



19%

FEMALE MINISTERS AT GLOBAL LEVEL

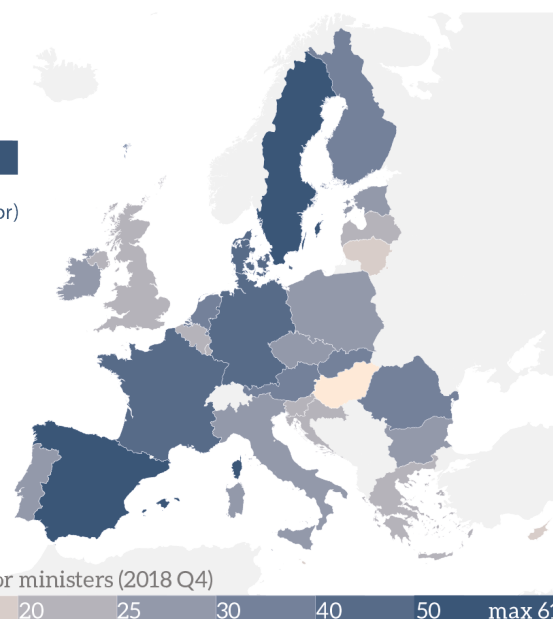
(as of January 2017)

In the fourth quarter of 2018, around 30% of ministers in EU governments were women. Spain topped the list with 61% of women ministers, while, at the other end of the ranking, only 7% of Hungarian ministers were women.

30%

FEMALE MINISTERS

in the EU-28 (junior and senior)

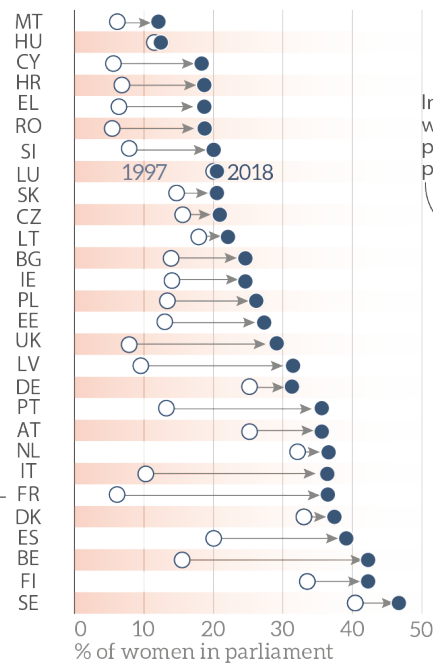


Data sources: Female heads of state and government ([EU Council](#), [UN Women](#)), female ministers, female leaders of political parties ([European Institute for Gender Equality](#), [UN Women](#)).

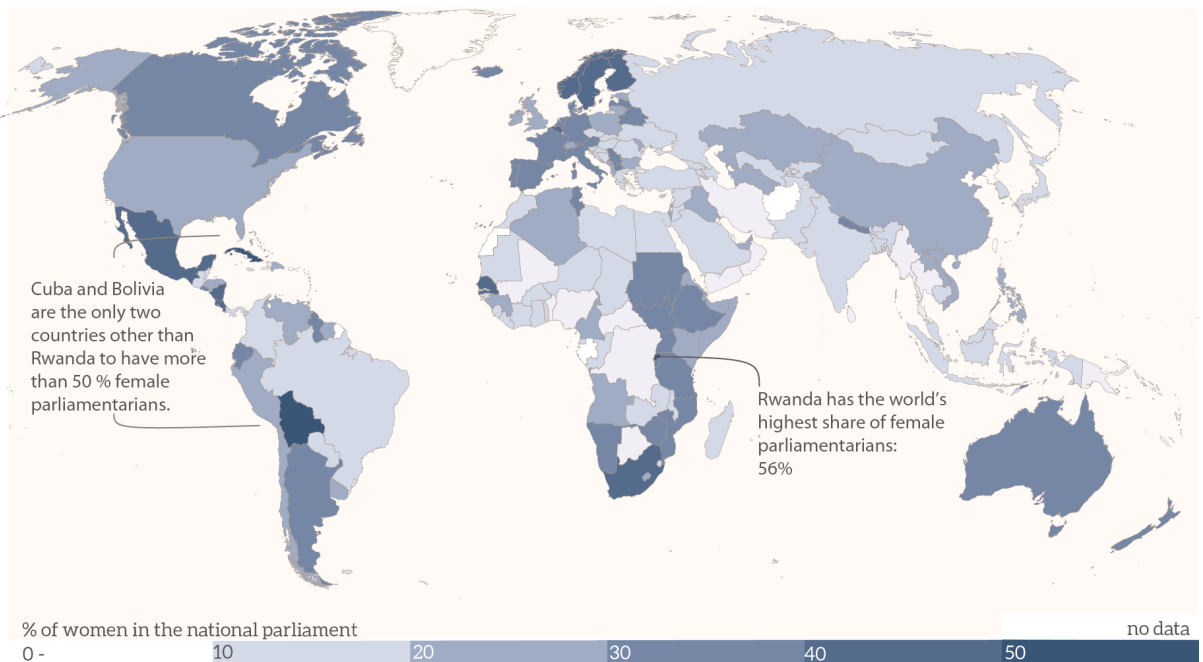
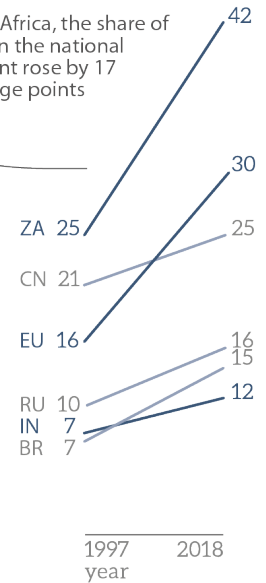
36%

**FEMALE MEMBERS
OF THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT**

In France the share of women in the national parliament rose by 30 percentage points, and it increased by more than 20 percentage points in five other Member States.



In South Africa, the share of women in the national parliament rose by 17 percentage points



Country codes: EU-28 - Belgium (BE), Bulgaria (BG), Czech Republic (CZ), Denmark (DK), Germany (DE), Estonia (EE), Ireland (IE), Greece (EL), Spain (ES), France (FR), Croatia (HR), Italy (IT), Cyprus (CY), Latvia (LV), Lithuania (LT), Luxembourg (LU), Hungary (HU), Malta (MT), Netherlands (NL), Austria (AT), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), Romania (RO), Slovenia (SI), Slovakia (SK), Finland (FI), Sweden (SE), United Kingdom (UK);
BRICS - Brazil (BR), China (CN), India (IN), Russia (RU), South Africa (ZA).

Data sources: [Inter-Parliamentary Union](https://www.interparliamentaryunion.org/).

Looking beyond the numbers

The adoption of specific political measures to ensure a better gender balance has helped promote women's empowerment. Women's [representation](#) in parliaments has significantly improved in countries where there are special measures, such as quotas. For example, France – which has recorded the largest increase in the EU in the share of women parliamentarians – has adopted [legislation](#) supporting gender parity in elected offices. It is however open to [debate](#) how much the presence of women in governments or parliaments promotes women's agendas and interests in political environments with limited freedom, such as one-party or dominant-party systems. For example, two of the three countries in the world whose parliaments have more than 50 % of female members (Cuba and Rwanda) do not score very well on [political freedom](#). It is therefore important to look beyond the numbers, at issues of [substantive representation](#): how much do political representatives, both women and men, speak out in favour of women's interests?

Outlook

Women's empowerment in politics requires a multidimensional approach. Preventing [violence](#) and harassment against women in elections, for example, should be a priority. More efforts are also needed to bring more, and particularly young, women into [political parties](#), to train women leaders, and boost women's skills to participate actively in elections as candidates and voters. This is crucial in the current political context characterised by citizens' dissatisfaction with politics.

EU gender policy

Achieving gender equality in all areas, including in politics, is an important [objective](#) pursued by the European Union in its internal and external policies. The European Commission's '[Strategic engagement for gender equality 2016-2019](#)' encourages Member States to adopt measures to improve the gender balance in political and public decision-making positions. The EU [gender action plan 2016-2020](#), which mainstreams women's empowerment and gender equality in EU external policies, sets a target of facilitating women's empowerment and participation in policy, governance and electoral processes at all levels.

The European Parliament is a strong supporter of women's empowerment and gender equality in political decision making, both within the EU and beyond its borders. In a [March 2017 resolution](#) on equality between women and men in the European Union, the Parliament called upon the EU leadership to make gender equality a priority, and to promote female representation at all levels of political and economic decision-making. In a [May 2018 resolution](#) on gender equality and women's empowerment in EU external relations, the Parliament asked for dedicated budget line to support the political participation of women in the EU's southern and eastern neighbourhood.

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

© European Union, 2019.

eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)

