



## WOMEN IN POLITICS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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### Executive Summary

Women's participation in politics has considerably increased over the last decades. However, there is still a limited representation of women in political institutions, such as the European Parliament, national parliaments, assemblies, governments, and generally in political offices.

The purpose of this brief is to analyze women's poor representation and suggest solutions to this problem in order to achieve gender equality.

Gender equality in political participation could be achieved through supporting mothers to study and work, balance family responsibilities, protect women against sexual harassment and eliminate sexist stereotypes.

#### Key points:

- I. Introduction
- II. Women in European institutions
- III. Women in national political institutions
- IV. Women in regional institutions
- V. Strategies for closing the gender gap.
- VI. Why gender equality is important?
- VII. Obstacles to gender balance
- VIII. Recommendations

## Introduction

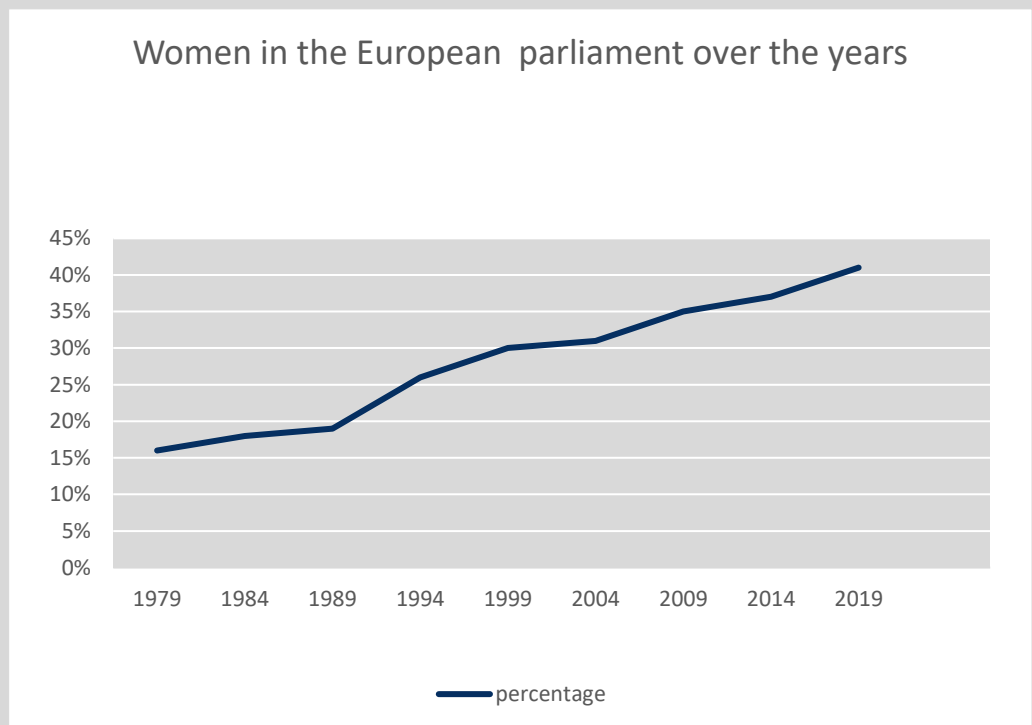
In 1848 the Women's rights movement started in the U.S.A. and in 1869 the Wyoming Suffrage Act gave women the right to vote in the territory for the first time. Women's suffrage in Europe began in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It started in Finland in 1906. The first woman to be elected was Jeannette Pickering Rankin in 1916 in the U.S.A. More than 100 years after the fight for women's suffrage the data confirm that women are not still equal to men as far as political representation is concerned.

Yet, after one century, gender equality in politics has not been accomplished. Women's equal political representation is an important factor for both gender equality and democracy. Gender balance will benefit social welfare. It will enhance justice and empower women's position as well.

## WOMEN IN EUROPEAN INSTITUTIONS

### European Parliament

The representation of women in the European parliament has considerably increased in the past two decades. The percentage of women MEPs in 1979 was 16.6% while men was 83.4%. After two decades (1999) this percentage changed to 26.8% for women and 73.2% for men, respectively. Today, women represent 39.3% of the MEPs.



Source: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20190226STO28804/women-in-the-european-parliament-infographics>

(Data edited by the author).

The percentage of women members in the European Parliament varies in each European country. Cyprus is the only country that has a 100% representation of men in the European Parliament (6 out of 6). Romania is the country with the second-lowest women's percentage 5 MEPs out of 33 (15.2%). On the other hand, Finland's MEPs are mostly women with 7 MEPs women and 6 men. The country with the second-highest women's representation is Sweden, with 55% women (11 women out of 20 MEPs). Denmark, Latvia, Luxemburg and Slovenia have equal representation of both sexes. It is evident that in the European Parliament women's representation in the European Parliament has considerably increased.

## European Commission

The European Commission has made an important effort over the years in order to achieve gender parity. Today, women represent 48.1% of the commissioners (13 women out of 27), a high percentage compared to the 25% in 1999.

In 2019 Ursula Von der Leyen was elected as President of the European Commission, the first woman to hold this office. That was an especially important step to achieve gender equality in politics. With a woman leading the European Commission, stereotypes will be reduced and people will understand that women are as capable as men to hold important political positions.

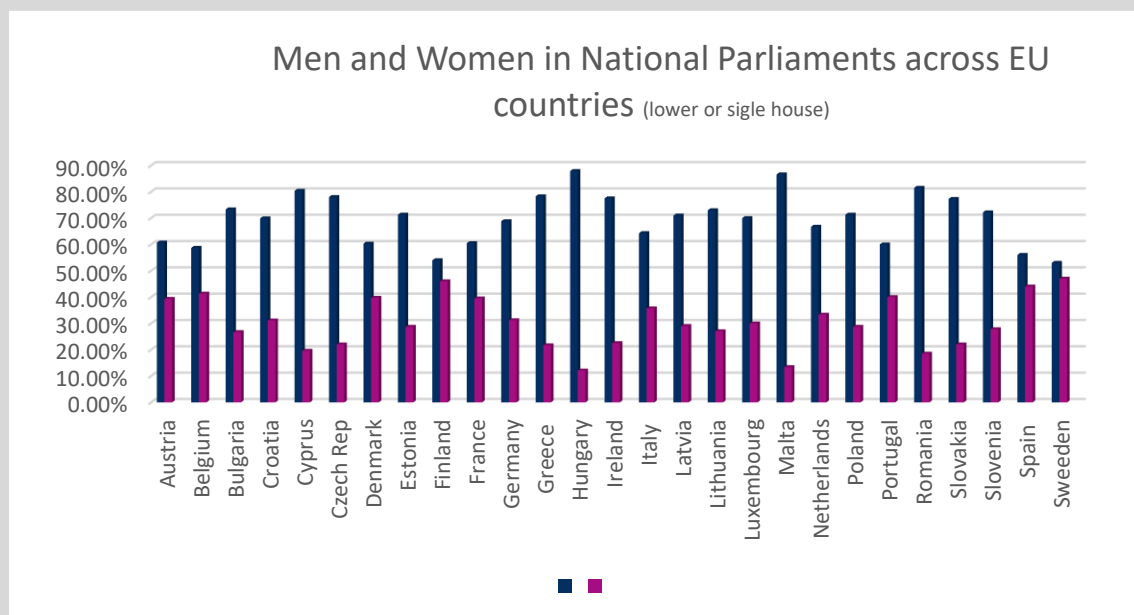
## **WOMEN IN NATIONAL POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS**

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Women are underrepresented in national political institutions more than in European institutions. In EU countries in total, women constitute 30.1% of national political institutions. There is no European country with equal or higher women representation. The country with the lowest percentage of women is Slovenia with 10% in its national Council, followed by Hungary, with 12% in its national assembly, and then Malta with 13.4% in its House of Representatives. The countries with the highest percentages are Sweden 46.9% (parliament), Finland 46% (parliament), and Spain 44 % (Congress of Deputies).

Only 4 countries out of 27 have women as national leaders. Germany, with Chancellor Angela Merkel, Lithuania with Ingrida Šimonytė (Prime Minister), Norway Erna Solberg (Prime Minister), and Finland Sanna Mirella Marin (Prime Minister).

Regarding the national parliaments, women represent 32,8% across EU countries.



\* source : <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=1&year=2021>  
(Data edited by the author.)

## WOMEN IN REGIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Women are not equally represented in political decision making in regional institutions either. The country with the highest percentage of female members in the local political life is France with 48.9% followed by Sweden with 47.5%. Belgium, Spain, Norway percentages of 42.2%, 46.8%, and 44.7% respectively. In some European countries, women's representation in local political institutions is exceptionally low with less than 1/5 of them being women. In Italy, Hungary, and Slovakia this percentage is less than 20%.

## STRATEGIES FOR CLOSING THE GENDER GAP

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### Quotas

Quotas is a "positive measurement instrument aimed at accelerating the achievement of gender-balanced representation" \*.

Quotas establish a mandatory or voluntary percentage or number of seats for women or either gender in order to achieve gender parity.

Those numerical targets are divided into two categories: the legislated gender quotas (hard measures) and the voluntary party quotas (soft measures). The countries which first introduced gender quotas were Belgium and France in the early 2000s. Today 10 European countries implement legislated quotas (Belgium, France, Croatia, Greece, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain). Voluntary quotas are implemented in 19 EU member states. Czech Republic and Denmark have no quota.

The impact of this measurement was clear. Women's political representation has considerably increased since its implementation.

\*<https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/local-election-results-underline-case-for-gender-quotas-1.3910900>

## WHY GENDER POLITICAL EQUALITY IS IMPORTANT

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Women's equal representation in politics brings economic, social, and political benefits. Equal representation of both genders is the key element of Democracy. The proper function of Democracy entails political equality. Women make up, approximately, half the world's population; therefore, they must be represented in politics accordingly.

The increase of women's political participation will have a positive social effect as it will contribute to the improvement of their standard of living. Women's marginalization from employment is a downside that already exists. Increased women's representation in politics promotes their inclusion in the labor market and their financial development as well.

Evidently, women's presence in politics has had various social effects due to the fact that women politicians prioritize issues such as education, health, child labor equality, and parental leave.

## OBSTACLES TO GENDER BALANCE

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Although women's participation in politics and public life, in general, has considerably increased, there are still inequalities due to a series of social barriers. The notion claiming that women are not fit for politics is widespread even in developed societies in the 21st century. There still exist gender stereotypes today supporting that women are not capable or suitable for participating in politics. Not only men but also women consider politics not to be women's affairs.

Moreover, another factor that contributes to women being underrepresented is unequal family responsibility. A high percentage of women in Europe take charge of family affairs and as a result, they have less time, compared to men, to engage in work or participate in politics.

Last but not least, sexual harassment is a limiting factor. Sexual abuse and violence against women are widespread problems. Almost 60% of women have experienced sexual coercion and sexual harassment in the workplace.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EQUAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS.

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- **Support mothers to study, work and get involved in politics and public life.** Being a mother should not negate the ability to work, study and focus on professional life. Mothers ought to be financially and psychologically supported by the state to raise their children and keep working at the same time. It is of great importance to women to have provision of leave during and after their pregnancy and not be fired but keep being paid and retain their position.
- **Balanced family responsibilities.** Women should have the same responsibilities as men in the family. Parental and family responsibilities should not be taken on by mothers only, but by fathers as well. It is especially important that men be entitled to leave as well in order to take care of their family (babysitting, housework).
- **Education is a pathway towards gender equality.** Character building starts at an early age. From this vulnerable age children should learn to respect both sexes and their equality. It should be emphasized, by their parents and school, that men and women have the same abilities, capacities and thus

the same opportunities. The stereotype claiming that women make housewives and men make successful workers, must be eliminated. Children are the future of this world; therefore, this world could be made equal, more democratic and more respectful by children with bright characters.

- **Protect women against sexual harassment.** Sexual harassment is a common problem that many women face in their workplace. Many of the victims are afraid to talk about it and denounce it. Others are afraid that they could be fired.

It is crucial for women to speak out and denounce sexual harassment cases.

The state must help and support women by enacting laws. The legal framework for sexual abuse must be stricter.

Furthermore, employers and managers should be informed about their rights and about how to deal with this problem. The state should help and encourage employers to fight for their rights and to denounce sexual harassment.

- **The role of media in gender equality.** Media should stop depict women only as housewives and mothers. Instead, they should stress their role as successful workers, politicians, ambassadors, Ministers and prime ministers. Women are capable of becoming whatever they want, and that's something the media should point out.

## Ruth Bader Ginsburg

*"Women belong in all places where decisions are being made. It shouldn't be that women are the exception."*

\* <https://www.gendersontheballot.org/5-ruth-bader-ginsburg-quotes/>



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