

UN Women

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‘Women’s full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls’

Virtual Meeting

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Report of the Expert Group

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1 Introduction

The 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 2021 will consider “Women’s full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls” as its priority theme. To take stock of current research, and assist the Commission in its deliberations on the priority theme, UN Women convened a virtual Expert Group Meeting (EGM) from 5–8 October 2020.

The EGM built on the priority themes of the preceding CSW sessions, taking special note of the 50th session which also considered equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels. While the EGM acknowledged the evolving manner that women participate in, and influence, public life and decision-making, progress on women’s political participation at all levels of decision-making has stalled in many regions and even regressed in some places. The EGM recognized the diverse situations and experiences of women in different parts of the world, noting the multiple and intersecting identities held by women in public life – including age, class, racial or ethnic identities, sexual orientation and gender identities and those living with disabilities – as well as the different inequalities they face in various aspects of public life relating to their social location.

The EGM also considered the erosion of democracy and rise of authoritarian politics in many parts of the world, and that increased numbers of women participating in public life have rarely prevented a regression in gender equality. The EGM observed the role feminist organizations play in supporting and amplifying the work of women in public life, including their calls for more open and enabling environments, safe spaces online and offline for organizing, and more support for capacity-building. The pressing issue of violence against women in political and public life was raised throughout, with particular attention focused on its causes, manifestations, effects and ways to prevent it, as well as concerns about gender-based violence in contexts of democratic backsliding.

The EGM developed action-oriented recommendations to address gaps and support implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The objective of the recommendations is to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls through ensuring women’s full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence. This report summarizes the context, challenges and recommendations discussed and agreed by the experts during the meeting. The recommendations require a global effort that acknowledges the centrality of boys and girls in changing attitudes and supports coalition-building between feminists, political parties, elected officials and grassroots communities. The recommendations reflect a belief that despite significant challenges identified by experts there remains great optimism for what is possible through coordinated, global efforts to achieve women’s full and effective participation and decision-making in public life at local, regional, national and global levels.

2 Context: The state of women’s participation in decision-making and public life

Twenty-five years ago, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) recognized women’s unequal share of power and decision-making as one of twelve critical areas of concern. It laid out concrete actions to ensure women’s equal access to, and full participation in, power structures, and to develop women’s capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.¹ The Beijing Declaration also set the international

¹ See <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/01/beijing-declaration>.

target of ‘gender balance’ in decision-making. Since then, Member States have made successive commitments to women’s leadership, most recently recognizing in 2015 that women’s “full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life” is required to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite some gains in women’s formal political participation, however, overall women continue to face myriad obstacles in accessing power, are underrepresented in local and national decision-making in all regions of the world and are targeted with violence aimed at discouraging and removing them from public life.

“Public life can be defined, broadly, as the realm within which formal political processes are embedded, and activities concerned with public and political issues take place. It can include but is not limited to the work of government, media, civil society organizations, networks of activists and other figures in public-facing roles. People’s participation within public life can be characterized as formal and informal.”² The EGM considered women’s participation and decision-making in public life in both formal decision-making processes and informal spaces – from community and local to national and global levels.

The 2020 review of the BPFa found that women’s representation in national parliaments doubled from 12 per cent in 1995 to an average of 24.3 per cent globally in 2019, with the global median representation of women at 21 per cent. Only 9 per cent of States have achieved or surpassed the target of gender balance in their parliaments.³ Local government representation is higher at 36.3 per cent. Although it falls unacceptably short of gender balance,⁴ the local level is considered a powerful catalyst for women’s participation in public life and decision-making overall. The use of legislated quotas, in specific types of electoral systems, has been well documented as having substantial impact on the representation of women.⁵ Quotas, which were intended to be a temporary and catalytic strategy for redressing gender imbalances in leadership, have remained the most reliable means for getting women elected and increasing their numbers in leadership positions.

An assessment of women participating outside formal political processes is harder to make. Studies indicate high levels of discrimination within public institutions. There are significant data gaps concerning levels of participation of the most marginalized groups, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) women, indigenous, Afro-descendent women and migrants, women with disabilities, less educated and low paid women and rural women. There is limited data available on women in public administration across all spheres of government, civil society and political parties. Social movement membership can be fluid and there is a paucity of data about activists worldwide.

The Feminist Mobilization Index, however, provides new and compelling data about the proliferation of feminist movements and their role in shaping policy. The numbers on women’s representation, where they exist, paint a distinct yet partial picture. However, multiple indicators are necessary to understand the barriers to women’s full and effective participation in public life. What is urgently needed is a multidimensional framework that measures numbers of office holders, democratic development, changes

² S. Hassim and S. L. Weldon, (2020). *Women’s Informal Participation in Political and Public Life and Space: Global Trends and Challenges*. Background paper prepared for the Expert Group Meeting. Available at https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/hassim%20weldon_how%20women%20participate_bp2_csw65egm.pdf?la=en&vs=1527

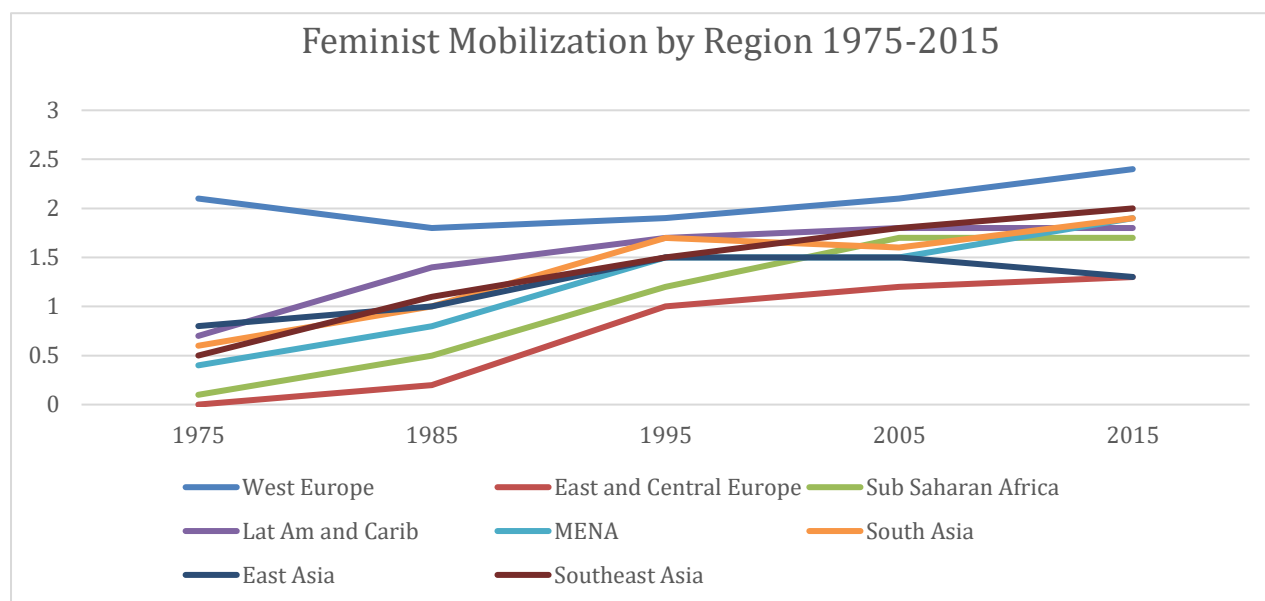
³ See <https://undocs.org/E/CN.6/2020/3>.

⁴ See <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/csw65%20egm%20concept%20note%20final.pdf?la=en&vs=1709>.

⁵ See <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/csw65%20egm%20concept%20note%20final.pdf?la=en&vs=1709>

in values and norms, participation in civil society, and policy outcomes that support women⁶ and includes the use of disaggregated data to better understand trends and the particular realities of different women's groups. This could support a greater understanding of intersectional inequalities and provide a stronger basis for comparative analysis across countries and regions. Analysis using such a framework suggests that the numerical rise of women in political leadership, however incremental, still outpaces the shift in attitudes required to normalize women's participation in decision-making and across public life more broadly.

Graph 1: Feminist Mobilization Index data



From *Women's Informal Participation in Political and Public Life and Space: Global Trends and Challenges*, Shireen Hassim and S. Laurel Weldon.

The challenges women face in participating are multifaceted. Social and cultural norms also hold women back from political participation by creating a vicious cycle: the political arena is seen as male, women stay out, or are kept out, and they do not feel capable as leaders.⁷ The norms that harm women and girls, and prevent their participation, are not abstract. They have material impacts and confine women's experience to reductive binaries, such as choosing between caring for their loved ones and participating in public life. Women who are 'othered' face additional constraints to participating and these can be specific to their social location. For example, paternalistic and sexist behaviours conspire to produce and compound the negative experiences of young women who wish to lead, especially those with a feminist agenda. Acts and threats of violence serve as both cause and consequence of women's limited participation in public life. The elimination of violence against women and girls remains critical for achieving women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life.

⁶ See https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/norris_state%20of%20womens%20participation%20and%20empowerment_bp1_csw65egm.pdf?la=en&vs=1554.

⁷ See https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/hassim%20weldon_how%20women%20participate_bp2_csw65egm.pdf?la=en&vs=1527.

Beneath the slow progress, stagnation and even regression in some places in achieving gender equality lie resistant social and cultural norms. Certainly, structural and institutional inequalities deter or prohibit women from participating in public life. These very often include limited access to capital for campaigning, caring responsibilities, and a lack of support from family, networks and relevant institutions, as well as alarming levels of violence against women in public life. Women lawmakers and policymakers have the potential to raise awareness about and address violence against women in public life; women in decision-making at all levels can trigger more gender-responsive institutions. For women to be able to participate fully in decision-making and public life, we need inclusive, caring, gender-sensitive societies in which gender-sensitive and gender-responsive institutions are the norm.

The exclusion of women from formal political processes has not, however, deterred them from finding new and different ways to participate in public life and to influence decision-making. Women have been mobilized by the challenges of the moment, fighting to protect the gains they have made and to secure the rights they have been historically denied. The spaces in which women organize are evolving and the frequency and mode fluctuates; partly due to restrictions in authoritarian contexts, there has been a rapid increase in digital activism, offering new platforms, mediums and vocabulary for women to participate. There is a risk of overstating the benefits of digital activism, however, as they can also reinforce inequalities along the digital divide and platforms are often home to some of the most virulent attacks against women's political and digital rights. Notwithstanding the risks, online and offline activism increasingly influences policy and social norms and participation often leads women to eventually take part in formal politics as well. Given their online activity and visibility, it is vital that women can participate in the online space on equal terms, free from the smear campaigns, biases and violence they currently suffer online.

The glacial shift in values about public life and gender roles, combined with increases in the visibility of women's leadership over the last 25 years, have contributed to a significant backlash against women's rights. Indeed, authoritarian, populist and traditionalist⁸ parties and leaders have secured greater political power, and their influence in public discourse and policy responses has continued, or restored, gender discrimination and increased violence against women in public life. The backlash has been typified by rollbacks in exercising rights and a common positioning of feminism and women's rights as an enemy as when gender "ideology" is used as a term or concept to justify dismantling hard-won human rights for women.⁹ Hand in hand with democratic backsliding, the backlash is most keenly felt by women's rights organizations, women human rights defenders and women leaders on the frontlines of protecting women's rights and even democracy itself.¹⁰

Crises both hasten and heighten decision-making processes and lead to bypassing established norms in the interest of addressing immediate and pressing concerns. The year 2020 brought with it the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic – the full impact of which is unprecedented and still unfolding. Early research, however, suggests that women, already more vulnerable to shocks, will be disproportionately¹¹ affected by the pandemic's indirect impacts. The UN Secretary-General has clearly warned that "COVID-19 could reverse the limited progress that has been made on gender equality and women's rights."¹² Certainly, violence

⁸ 'Traditionalist' is used here as a term encompassing conservative, anti-feminist and similar ideologies.

⁹ See <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/64/egm/bioli%20fexpert%20paperdraftegmb25ep2.pdf?la=en&vs=3520>.

¹⁰ See <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/64/egm/roggeband%20c%20and%20a%20krizsanbackground%20paperfinalegmb25bgp1.pdf?a=en&vs=3842>.

¹¹ See [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099\(20\)30568-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099(20)30568-5/fulltext).

¹² See <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/put-women-and-girls-centre-efforts-recover-covid-19>.

against women and girls has emerged as a shadow pandemic during COVID-19.¹³ The stresses of the virus must not be used to excuse or further legitimize violence against women and girls or exclude women from public life.

Women, whose perspectives and lived experiences are frequently overlooked in decision-making, are more susceptible to policy erasure during crisis. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and physical confinement have exacerbated housing precarity issues, which can hamper women's access to reproductive rights and social protection. Overly represented in informal economy sectors, women are hit hard by the loss of jobs, leading to an increase in precarity and impoverishment that affect racialized women and immigrant women disproportionately. With schools closed and childcare services compromised, women are overburdened by unpaid care work, and their high participation in professional care work generates aggregated physical and emotional costs.

At the same time, crises can bring about new norms for leadership. There is an opportunity now for institutions and their leaders to be more responsive to, and representative of, their constituents – in the present and in the future. As recovery plans are discussed and adopted, we need to address crises through a new gender-responsive economic and development model that centres on people's needs and care. It is also critical to recognize women's roles at the “helm of institutions carrying out effective and inclusive COVID-19 responses, from the highest levels of decision-making to frontline service delivery.”¹⁴

Along with the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and persistent conflicts – such as those related to land and resources – present existential threats to the planet and its people. Yet, half of the global population cannot see themselves, or their lived experiences, reflected in their leaders. Inadequate representation exposes women to the reversal, limitation and even removal of their hard-won rights and increases their vulnerability to crises, the impacts of which they experience more vividly. As the Covid-19 pandemic persists, political campaigns, debates, and consultations have increasingly moved online. Now, more than ever, public impressions of women and leadership are shaped through online interaction, therefore ensuring fair coverage – both in mainstream and social media – is urgent and critical. The challenges of this moment must be met by brave, transformative and truly representative leadership, especially by male leaders. It is no longer enough for Member States to hear the call for women's leadership; it is time for them to respond fully.

2.1 General recommendations responding to the current context

The pushback against women's rights from misogynist and traditionalist forces who seek to maintain power has been robust with women's empowerment stalling in many parts of the world. Over the four-day discussion, there was a sense of urgency among experts regarding the need for various stakeholders to take actions to redress gender imbalances in leadership. Experts recommend the following to ensure women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life and to eliminate violence against them.

- Member States, international agencies and civil society should reassert the centrality of women's participation and decision-making in public life to achieve sustainable development by supporting a

¹³ See <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>.

¹⁴ See <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/06/policy-brief-covid-19-and-womens-leadership>.

Fifth World Conference on Women as well as related regional summits, foregrounded in the backlash against women's rights and building on the Generation Equality Forums.

- All spheres of government, international agencies, women leaders and allies, parliamentarians, and civil society, feminist, grassroots and community-based organizations should establish a global coalition to defend the rights of girls and women – in all their diversity – to participate in public life and decision-making (including in electoral processes), end impunity for all forms of gender-based violence, safeguard women's rights, and respond to threats of regression through relevant policies and forums.
- Member States and local and regional governments should enable and support a favourable and pluralistic environment for civil society and other stakeholders to combat the backlash against women's human rights by strengthening reporting mechanisms, organizing audits of all spheres of government regarding policies and actions related to gender equality and women's participation, applying sanctions when persistent non-compliance is observed through independent systems of justice, and safeguarding freedom of expression.
- Member States should enable sustainable peace by resisting anti-rights trends and movements with a definitive response – through legal and institutional frameworks – to accelerate efforts to improve women's participation in public life and decision-making, while providing the necessary resources and capacities for all spheres of government and political parties to apply principles of non-regression and non-discrimination, grounded in binding human rights obligations, and fulfil their commitments to the protection and promotion of the rights of women and girls.
- States must ensure implementation and compliance of the recommendations that have already been made by women's human rights mechanisms – including the CEDAW Committee and the Working Group on the Issue of Discrimination against Women and Girls. Member States need to set-up review mechanisms to understand progress to date, redress gaps in women's participation in political and public life and address the discrimination and violence they experience.
- Civil society organizations (CSOs) should unite forces to denounce and react to systemic and institutional threats to women's rights and participation. CSOs should use the work of women's human rights monitoring mechanisms and call for the implementation of their recommendations by Member States, participate in formal review processes and, when necessary, invoke the Communications Mechanism of Special Procedures to demand accountability for threats and potential regression. The human rights mechanisms include the CEDAW Committee, UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences and the UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls – all of which have all expressed concern about the limited participation of women in public and political life globally.
- Member States should counter democratic backsliding and gender backlash by supporting feminist movements and women's networks and by providing more guarantees for safeguarding members' political and civil rights. Indeed, the relevance of these movements and networks has increased in light of the COVID-19 pandemic as they can help identify specific impacts on women and girls and provide guidance on how best to respond to women's needs, and provide them with continued support during these difficult times.

- Member States, local and regional governments, international agencies, parliaments, the private sector and civil society all need to ensure women’s representation and systematic participation. They need to seek gender parity with more women in leadership roles, on COVID-19 response committees, task forces and groups regarding related legislative, policy and budgetary decisions. Women’s representation is also necessary in the pandemic’s aftermath; recovery plans and funds need to address gender inequality, care work and the gender pay gap and pay attention to the difficult and differentiated impacts of the pandemic, and subsequent crises, on women and girls.
- Member States, local and regional governments, parliaments, academic and research institutions and international agencies should all coordinate and cooperate in both conducting data-based assessments of the impact of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, on women’s participation and decision-making in public life and monitoring responses and interventions through the collection of sex-disaggregated data.

3 Key challenges and recommendations for women’s full and equal participation in decision-making and public life

3.1 Gaps in data and measuring women’s participation in public life

Understanding women’s participation in public life requires a depth and breadth of data that has not been systematically collected historically. There have nonetheless been significant advances made in the production of data on women’s participation, including the development of indicators for measuring progress towards gender equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which require Member States to produce and report on relevant data. Member States have been responsive to these requirements and new data supports stakeholder advocacy efforts for women’s political representation in elected bodies. Data gaps persist, however, in measuring women’s participation more broadly over time in various spheres, levels and dimensions of public life including in public administration, political parties, trade unions, civil society and as voters.

Two standard indicators – the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments, and the proportion of seats held by women in locally elected deliberative bodies – are used to assess progress in women’s political participation and leadership.¹⁵ The availability of data on local government is a very recent and welcome advancement given that for more than two decades the only standard and globally comparable measurement of women’s political participation was their representation in national parliaments. While important, both indicators provide a limited perspective of women’s participation in decision-making and public life. What is now needed is a more comprehensive and nuanced assessment – including qualitative research and data from attitudinal surveys to complement existing quantitative measurements – as well as disaggregated data to enable intersectional analysis. To measure additional dimensions of political participation, stakeholders could also make better and more frequent use of existing survey and attitudinal datasets – such as the World Values Survey, Varieties of Democracies Project and the Feminist Mobilization Index.

A variety of actors collect data relevant to assess gender equality in public administration, including local and regional governments, civil society groups and academic and research institutions, but the data is not

¹⁵ SDG Target 5.5

widely shared. More concerted efforts are required to facilitate data exchange and ensure comparability between different stakeholder groups. SDG target 16.7¹⁶ on responsive and inclusive decision-making has stimulated the production of official data and statistics collection of relevant datasets supporting stakeholders to hold governments accountable but there is a long way to go. Comparability between datasets remains a particular challenge.

While some data is disaggregated by age and location, in addition to sex, there remain gaps in data relating to race, disability status, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexuality, gender and other identities. Ensuring that data is collected about marginalized groups, and the specific ways they might be excluded from participating, is essential for increasing the representation and participation of all women, particularly at the local level. The critical need for such data, which renders visible women who have been unseen historically and thus excluded from exercising their political rights is tempered, however, by privacy concerns around the misuse of microdata.

The restriction of space and movement caused by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic creates additional pressure for data to be collected. Such data would contribute to a better understanding of the systemic needs of women and the role of women's leadership in crisis. Indeed, continuing to collect data recognizes that without adequate sex-disaggregated data statistics, governments will be ill-equipped to respond to women in both present and future crises.

3.1.1 Expert recommendations on closing data and measurement gaps on women's participation in public life

- National Statistics Offices (NSOs), and other national data producers, should capture the SDG principle of leaving no one behind (LNOB)¹⁷ by collecting and disseminating data disaggregated by sex, gender and other categories. In particular, they need to take into account women's differentiated identities and experiences, including – but not limited to – young women, women with disabilities, LGBTIQ+, indigenous and Afro-descendent women, women from religious minorities, impoverished women, rural women and migrant women.
- National Statistical Systems, with the support of international agencies, should contribute to a fuller understanding of women's participation in public life by filling in sex-disaggregated data (SDD) gaps on elected and non-elected/appointed positions at national and subnational levels.
- Local and regional governments and their associations should work with NSOs, national governments, the UN system and research institutions to develop reporting mechanisms and organize surveys to generate comparable and global data on women's participation and decision-making in local and regional spheres of government, including positions in the public administration, decision-making and consultative bodies, elected and non-elected positions and other relevant spaces.

¹⁶ See <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/peace-justice/>.

¹⁷ From *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2016*: "Ensuring these commitments [the Sustainable Development Goals] are translated into effective action requires a precise understanding of target populations. However, the disaggregated data needed to address all vulnerable groups – including children, youth, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants – as specified in the 2030 Agenda, are sparse. Few of the current indicators, for example, are able to shed light on the particular situations of migrants, refugees, older persons, persons with disabilities, minorities and indigenous peoples. Even from the limited data currently available, however, it is clear that the benefits of development are not equally shared...". See full text at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2016/leaving-no-one-behind>.

- Member States and international agencies should make use of existing available data on women’s participation and representation in public life and decision-making for progressive action on women’s participation and commit to regularly updating and adding new data.
- Member States and international agencies should commit to making use of existing available data on women’s participation and representation in public life and decision-making. This will help improve understanding of current obstacles to – and alternatives for – building effective policies that guarantee gender equality.
- International agencies, research institutions and civil society organizations should generate knowledge regarding the persistent challenges experienced by women in public life by complementing official statistics – with additional qualitative and quantitative data – and making this data available to various users.
- Member States, with support from the UN, international agencies, NSOs and research institutions, should regularly and systematically collect data and monitor harassment, threats, gendered disinformation and other acts of violence against women in public life (both online and offline) by developing and using harmonized data collection tools and indicators, including at local and regional levels.
- The UN, international agencies and national research and academic institutions should promote and build the capacities of NSOs to collect cross-national and comparable data to close SDD gaps and identify additional data needs by, for example, using a set of harmonized indicators and covariates, global statistical standards, open data for benchmarking and monitoring, and expanding use of non-official statistics on, among other things, women’s participation in civic movements, community organizations, political parties and digital activism.
- All spheres of government, international agencies, CSOs and academic and research institutions should collaborate to build data literacy among media and their capacity to use and effectively communicate existent data on women’s participation and decision-making in public life.
- Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs), in collaboration with NSOs and with the support of international agencies and research institutions, should address SDD gaps on electoral participation at national, regional and local elections, by developing safe data infrastructure and by producing statistical summaries on voters, registered voters, voter turnout, candidates, elected candidates and incidents of violence, disaggregated by sex and other characteristics that represent women’s identities while maintaining data confidentiality.
- International organizations and NSOs should use gender-sensitive indicators in electoral observation data collection methodologies and harmonize data compilation for comparison (e.g. from OSCE/ODIHR,¹⁸ or Declaration of Principles Guidelines).

3.2 Incremental progress and barriers to women’s representation in decision-making

¹⁸ Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

Women are underrepresented at all levels of decision-making in all regions of the world. Increases in the number of women in elected office globally are protracted and inconsistent with only a handful of countries having achieved the BPfA goal of gender balance.¹⁹ The explanations for this incremental progress towards women's equal representation are varied and complex. Better diagnoses of the reasons are needed to take meaningful and impactful remedial actions. Unpacking issues related to privilege and power can support a greater understanding of context-specific values and ideologies, socioeconomic factors, and the role different stakeholders, such as the media, might play in supporting increased and sustained representation of women in public life. Political parties, as gatekeepers to elected office, play a key role in either enabling or hampering women's meaningful participation in national and local spheres of government.

Representation is not just about numbers, but the numbers do matter. Research shows that gender quotas have a direct and positive impact on the numerical representation of women and can prevent the backsliding of women's representation in formal political institutions. Two-thirds of countries globally employ electoral gender quotas and over 80 countries have enshrined them in law, 80 per cent of which have also introduced gender quotas at the local level. Quotas are a form of affirmative action to redress entrenched privilege, responding specifically to the uninterrupted, global monopoly of decision-making powers of men (especially those from dominant ethnic, social, and economic elites). When properly designed and enforced – this is done most effectively when accompanied by sanctions and backed by law – quotas have a track record of success in increasing the number of women representatives. They also have symbolic power, increasing visibility of women leaders as role-models and inspiring other women to participate in public life. This is particularly important considering that women who reach elected positions might not seek re-election to the same extent as men.

Women's presence is important even if it does not necessarily translate into substantive representation. Quotas contribute to the vital benchmarks established to measure women's representation: the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments, and the proportion of seats held by women in locally elected deliberative bodies. It is also important to have a greater understanding of the extent to which representatives substantively reflect the needs and interests of women. Quotas are typically overlaid on existing systems that were not designed for women to thrive within. Other potential contributing factors to this systemic representation challenge include the lack of supportive networks for women leaders, and tokenistic treatment of women within parties, for example, to outwardly demonstrate their progressiveness while masking ill practices internally. Altogether, these factors limit women's capacity to pursue long-term political careers and this may in turn negatively impact women's substantive representation for gender equality. However, more work is needed to understand the long-term impact of Temporary Special Measures (TSMs) and the extent to which quotas lead to secondary effects on women's empowerment.

Expectations should not fall more heavily on women than on men. Women leaders are unjustly subjected to questions regarding their competency and whether they make quality contributions to political processes. Value judgements about the quality of women's leadership are socially constructed, building upon norms that are stacked against women from the outset. In addition, unreasonably high expectations are placed on the shoulders of women leaders to be more progressive, presuming that all elected women share a common ideology, a prerequisite that would deny women representation in all their diversity. These expectations are infrequently levelled at male representatives thereby reinforcing existing

¹⁹ See https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/norris_state%20of%20womens%20participation%20and%20empowerment_bp1_csw_65egm.pdf?la=en&vs=1554.

inequalities through setting an impossible standard for women to meet. The push for women's representation, therefore, should be predicated solely on women's rights as full and equal participants in democracy, and not on the 'quality' of their participation. It is important to note here that just, like male representatives, women representatives still overwhelmingly come from elite classes and are typically not in themselves representative of women's diversity. We need, therefore, an intersectional approach to assess the obstacles to women's representation and better understand how inequalities overlap other existing hierarchies.

Many women leaders are also expected to play a stewardship role regarding feminist policies. Disappointment occurs when some elected women leaders do not have the influence, or motivation, to pursue feminist policies within their party.

3.2.1 Expert recommendations on progress and barriers to women's representation in political institutions

- Member States should boost the international target for women's representation in political and public life and commit to the goal of gender parity (50-50) in all leadership and decision-making bodies and in executive and public administration positions at global, national, regional, and local levels.
- Member States, governments and legislatures at national, regional and local levels should take legal, policy and other actions to reach gender parity and full inclusion of women and men in decision-making bodies at all levels, including by reforming electoral systems and adopting gender quotas that include rank order rules for candidate lists (including vertical and horizontal placement) as well as sanctions for non-compliance (including rejection of candidate lists and oversight by relevant electoral authorities).
- Member States should take steps to ensure greater diversity and effective inclusion in representation and participation in decision-making bodies, public administration, public commissions and boards, as well as judicial bodies, by including marginalized and minority groups, targeting policies to address the specific challenges diverse groups of women face, and mainstreaming their needs, specificities and demands into broader policies and actions aimed at promoting women's leadership and representation.
- Political parties should lead on advancing women's participation and decision-making in public life, specifically by adopting and reporting publicly on measures to achieve gender parity and diversity in their party structures (including leadership, boards, secretariats and committees); ensuring transparency of party recruiting and nominating processes and broad participation by diverse groups (including in policy formulation and candidate selection processes); incorporating gender equality goals in party platforms and manifestos targeting diverse groups in membership outreach strategies; and exercising accountability and action against sexual misconduct and violence against women in politics through investigations and transparent complaints mechanisms.
- Political parties should encourage, celebrate, and support women to run for public office, occupy leadership and/or political roles. Parties should bring more young women into the political pipeline by encouraging girls' and young women's leadership in public life and politics. Cross-party networks should be developed to support women leaders and candidates, including by building relationships with academic institutions and civil society movements where young women and girls are participating,

as well as with social movements and women's organizations where more women are in leadership positions.

- All spheres of government and political parties should address unequal access to political support for women during election campaigning by ensuring an equal distribution of political finance and logistical support to women and men candidates, by default where State or public funding of political parties is provided. In addition, Member States should create, maintain and monitor the use of a non-partisan campaign financing fund or mechanism for women who wish to run for office at any level.
- All spheres of government and state institutions should ensure gender parity in the leadership of public administration and in the membership of public commissions and boards, including through the adoption and implementation of appropriate TSMs and quotas.
- Member States, legislatures and political parties should take appropriate measures to address women's disproportionate burden of caring and domestic responsibilities, which constitutes an enduring obstacle to women's participation. Member States can help women reconcile commitments in their private and public lives. For example, they can consider women's personal obligations when scheduling meetings, provide childcare facilities and some remuneration for political tasks, particularly at the local level where there is a significant and disproportionate share of unpaid and unrecognized political tasks when compared to other spheres of government.

3.3 Violence against women in political and public life

Violence against women puts their human rights at risk and can no longer be accepted. Violence against women in politics (VAWP)²⁰ is human and civil rights abuse and must be framed as such to adequately exercise accountability at all levels. VAWP particularly undermines our ability to achieve SDG 5 and SDG 16 and should be recognized and characterized as a challenge to democracy, rather than as a women's issue. International mechanisms and mandates already exist to protect women and respond to threats and acts of VAWP. These instruments have been active in preventing violence and offer good practices in their application; however, they are underutilized. Indeed, there is a sense that recommendations issued to States by these mechanisms and mandates have not been implemented.

VAWP is irrefutably a form of gender-based violence against women. The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, drawing from General Recommendation No. 19 (1992) on violence against women (para. 7), adopted by the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and General Recommendation No. 35 (2017) on gender-based violence against women, updating General Recommendation No. 19 of the CEDAW Committee, as well as the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (art. 1), provides the following definition of VAWP as: 'violence including in and beyond elections, consists of any act of gender-based violence, or threat of such acts, that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering and is directed against a woman in politics because she is a woman, or affects women disproportionately.'²¹ VAWP is a form of discrimination and human rights violation.²¹

²⁰ Violence against women in politics (VAWP) is the term most commonly used by the UN System, although other terms and abbreviations are used in different contexts, including violence against women in politics (VAWiP); political violence against women (PVAW); political violence and harassment, which is often used in parts of Latin America or electoral sexual gender-based violence (ESGBV).

²¹ See <https://www.unwomen.org/>

[/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/srvaw_vaw%20in%20politics_ep9_egmcs65.pdf?la=en&vs=4209](https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/srvaw_vaw%20in%20politics_ep9_egmcs65.pdf?la=en&vs=4209)

VAWP not only affects women engaged in formal politics, but women across public life, including women activists, journalists and human rights defenders. Violence is not homogenous in its expressions; rather, it assumes different forms and includes threats and actions, psychological abuse and harassment (which may include sexist and misogynist hate speech), physical and sexual assaults. VAWP can also be economic or symbolic. It takes place in person and online. Violence is experienced differently and often more harshly by specific groups of women, particularly ethnic minority and Afro-descendent women, as well as lesbians, women in areas of conflict and other marginalized groups of women and its gender patterns intersect with other hierarchies and dynamics of oppression. All violence must be recognized as such and denounced and met with sanctions to prevent normalization and escalation – from forms of humiliation and symbolic attacks to intimidation and threats to women’s lives.

Violence against women in politics and public life rarely occurs in a vacuum. Women are often targeted because they directly challenge political powers or, more insidiously, because as women they embody a challenge to the status quo. This is particularly the case for women who are racialized or defy gender roles. Violence acutely impacts women human rights activists and who work with vulnerable communities and groups in areas of conflict. Where there has been democratic backsliding, violence has been legitimized as a means of sustaining and enforcing rigid or traditional norms, leading to normalization of violence in public discourse. The relationship between the rise of authoritarian and populist powers and violence perpetrated against women in public life demands greater investigation.²² Indeed, this violence is part of the backlash against women’s rights from the far right and functions as a means of silencing women and curtailing their participation in public life more generally. VAWP often used as a tactic to deligitimize the assertion of women’s rights, and it is important to frame it within broader political landscaping.

Violence, as both threat and lived experience, deter women, especially young women, from participating in politics. In the context of shrinking civil society space, the few spaces that were more open to women, particularly young women, are declining. COVID-19 exacerbates these challenges, prohibiting and limiting organizing spaces and gatherings where young women had opportunities to lead, such as climate marches. Social media suggests an alternative scenario is possible since women are often more effective and have greater impact organizing online than men and in ways that are inexpensive and relatively easy. It seems that much of the violence against women and the gendered disinformation²³ spread online about women is specifically organized to tackle the potential strategic advantage that young women have to turn the tide politically. As such, it is essential to not only acknowledge VAWP as a deliberate tool for silencing women and stopping their full participation in public life but to also devise a coordinated response and demand greater accountability for dealing with violence.

3.3.1 Expert recommendations on eliminating violence against women in political and public life

²² See https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/biroli_violence_ep9_egmcs65.pdf?la=en&vs=3444.

²³ Gendered disinformation is the spread of deceptive or inaccurate information and images against women in politics, following storylines that often draw on misogyny, as well as gender stereotypes around the role of women. Paired with online violence, harassment and trolling against women in politics, this type of disinformation is used as a political tool to alter public perceptions of women in politics and their achievements, as well as discourage women from seeking political careers. See “Why Disinformation Targeting Women Undermines Democratic Institutions”, Power 3.0 Understanding Modern Authoritarian Influence, 1 May 2020. Available at <https://www.power3point0.org/2020/05/01/why-disinformation-targeting-women-undermines-democratic-institutions>.

- Member States and international agencies, in consultation with women and men in public life and civil society, should update existing global treaties on eliminating gender-based violence against all women to include specific reference to violence against women in politics.
- Member States, governments and legislatures at all levels and the judiciary should institute or strengthen legal frameworks with protections concerning VAWP, including by: reforming existing laws on eliminating violence against women (EVAW) to include the dimension of VAWP; introducing new laws criminalizing VAWP and political violence; and/or ensuring that existing laws are backed by enforceable mechanisms and budgetary resources to be effectively implemented.
- Member States should take steps to end impunity for all forms of gender-based violence against women and discrimination in public life by ensuring equal access to, and the safety of, spaces for women to exercise their political rights and engage in public activities, including in election campaigning and the media.
- Member States, international agencies and CSOs should make better use of international human rights mechanisms, special procedures and international conventions and bodies to facilitate reporting and redress mechanisms and protocols for responding to and preventing acts of VAWP, including within contexts of democratic backsliding. This may be done through, for example, the online reporting tool of the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, reports to the CEDAW Committee and the Working Group on the Issue of Discrimination against Women and by ratifying and monitoring the ILO Convention on Violence and Harassment (C190, Article 5) for addressing gender-based violence against women in institutions.
- Member States and international agencies should mobilize financial resources to adequately address, better understand and respond to gendered disinformation campaigns and the global issue of VAWP, including online violence.
- Governments and international agencies should combat VAWP online and offline, and gendered disinformation by creating and implementing a comprehensive and adequately resourced strategy, multi-stakeholder coalition, deliberate research agenda, and coordinated advocacy, including awareness-raising campaigns regarding the different types of VAWP and resources to denounce violence and support affected women.
- Private sector content-hosting platforms should ensure greater transparency and accountability towards users by enabling culturally competent and gender-sensitive content moderation, advertising, complaints and redress mechanisms with a view to opposing the normalization of violence and sharpening the lines between hate speech and other hate crimes against women in politics and public life.
- Member States, governments and legislatures at all levels as well as private sector content-hosting platforms should introduce fines for social media platforms that fail to remove abusive, sexist and misogynist content against women in political and public life – including gendered disinformation – and pass legislation making it illegal to intimidate and harass them online.
- All spheres of government should ensure fair and equal media coverage of women and men in politics, including by requiring media institutions and journalists to receive training on gender-responsive

reporting, providing protection for women journalists who are targets of political violence, and gathering and reporting on disaggregated data and incidents of VAWP through media coverage of both female and male politicians and candidates.

- Political parties and legislatures should acknowledge VAWP in their documents, censure and hold their members accountable for sexist and harassing behaviour and language both online and offline. They should ban the use and dissemination of sexist language, humiliating images, trolling and disinformation against women in politics that originates from their members by adopting codes of conduct regarding VAWP and gendered disinformation.
- In the context of COVID-19, governments and civil society organizations must observe and address violence against women in the public realm to ensure they can exercise their right to participation. Governments and CSOs need to address the pressing challenges faced by societies during the pandemic through awareness-raising and ‘call-out’ campaigns, regulations, networks of support and redress mechanisms for victims.

3.4 Gender stereotypes, norms and women’s participation in informal spaces

While typically context-specific, gender stereotypes and norms overwhelmingly contribute to a reduced role for women in public life. Pervasive norms that deter women from public life often relate to the sexual division of labour, the non-recognition of their unpaid domestic labour and perceptions that women belong to the private rather than the public sphere. As such, norms are pervasive, difficult for many women to circumvent, and outright prohibitive for some.

Norms are also predicated on overlapping identities. For example, women with disabilities are subject to discrimination based on ableism and sexism. Such discrimination is compounded by exclusionary structures and practices, such as inaccessible spaces, or assumptions about their sexual identities that erase them from reproductive policies. In another example, the intersection of racism and sexism can hypersexualize racialized women and expose them to particular kinds of violence.

The values and norms that underpin attitudes towards women’s leadership generally progress over time, with social liberalism accompanying economic growth and underscored by demographic and generational shifts. Despite some improvements, however, in many countries gender norms remain relatively unchanged. Deep-seated norms are upheld by religious traditions and historical legacies that are difficult to break. In contexts where gender equality is more normalized, it is expected that women’s substantive representation is more likely to increase.²⁴

Norms are created and sustained by a complex set of social and political hierarchies and, although they can be stubborn to shift, they can be influenced and changed by a broad range of actors and actions. For instance, elites are often the arbiters of norms, and their influence in international norm-setting spaces can reinforce inequalities. Norm setting spaces are varied and evolve. The internet is considered by some to be a new space with distinctive norms in which activists can strategize and create new identities and

²⁴ See https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/norris_state%20of%20womens%20participation%20and%20empowerment_bp1_csw_65egm.pdf?la=en&vs=1554.

meanings.²⁵ Other approaches to tackling harmful norms include youth-led gender transformative approaches tackle harmful social norms head on by encouraging young people to think critically about why girls and young women are denied opportunities available to boys and young men. This approach takes place within a framework that ties the exclusion of women explicitly to inequality and power asymmetries.²⁶

Women's leadership and feminist activism can also shift norms in real time. Everyday actions and small acts of resistance can have ripple effects that influence norms. The participation of women in feminist movements can in some contexts be interpreted as a radical act that, once undertaken, shifts what is acceptable for women to do. In turn, this shift expands the possibilities for what is acceptable policy change. Women who participate informally also serve as inspiration and role models for other women to participate in a variety of ways.²⁷

The informal participation of women in public life is increasingly influencing public discourse, policies and understandings of what full, effective and meaningful participation looks like. Examples can be found globally in the #metoo movement that was started online by activist Tarana Burke and resulted in public and penal reckonings for perpetrators as well as tangible policy reform. Likewise, the #niunamenos (not one woman less) movement, started in Argentina, had regional and global impact. These and other movements, many of them originating from young women themselves, demonstrate how social movements and informal participation in public life can impact formal decision-making processes. Informal participation ultimately also encourages women to participate formally, as it provides opportunities for them to develop political experience and build public personas.

3.4.1 Expert recommendations on gender stereotypes, norms and women's participation in informal spaces

- Member States should continue to promote, protect, build and implement policy frameworks around the fundamental principle that all human rights – notably political and civil rights and the right to live a life free from discrimination and violence – are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated.
- Governments, the UN and international agencies should counter the use and misuse of narratives around 'gender ideology' – used by specific lobbies to misinform societies and undermine the advancement of women's rights and gender equality – by reasserting the validity of terminology on gender issues. In this regard, government attempts at censorship and banning gender studies and research demand special attention.
- International agencies, donors and governments should continue to fund women's and feminist rights organizations so they may continue their work and have greater influence on decision-making; in

²⁵ See https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/hassim%20weldon_how%20women%20participate_bp2_csw65egm.pdf?la=en&vs=1527.

²⁶ See https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/aruri_advancing%20youth%20participation%20to%20achieve%20gender%20transformative%20change_ep7_egmcs65.pdf?la=en&vs=4154.

²⁷ See https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/hassim%20weldon_how%20women%20participate_bp2_csw65egm.pdf?la=en&vs=1527.

particular, funds should be secured to maintain support for organizations in times of crisis when it is most needed.

- All spheres of government should promote young people's, especially young women's, effective participation in national and international platforms by adopting a more gender transformative approach in policymaking and decision-making processes.
- Member States and government at all levels should support awareness-raising regarding discrimination, racism and sexism and destigmatizing women's participation and decision-making in public life by consulting with civil society groups that work to sensitize the public on these issues.
- Member States and government at all levels should address negative social norms that hinder women's rights and participation in public life by aiming to influence men and boys and community and religious leaders as gatekeepers to women's community engagement.
- Member States should enable all women and men to live together in harmony and enjoy the benefits of good governance by enacting constitutional reforms that recognize gender, religious, linguistic and cultural diversity.
- Member States should identify and repeal discriminative provisions, direct or indirect, and adopt legislation that expressly and comprehensively outlaws different types of discrimination by undertaking a comprehensive review of their domestic legislation.
- Governments and academic institutions should develop and nurture generations that embrace the concepts of gender equality in society and the participation of all in decision-making by undertaking periodic and continuous reviews of school curricula to consolidate the concepts of human rights and women's rights and to teach children the importance of equality and respect for diversity.
- Technology companies should ensure they do not reinforce gender stereotypes by partnering with women's rights organizations to review implicit biases in the design of products, particularly feminized artificial intelligence technologies such as digital assistants Alexa, Cortana and Siri (in their default settings), and adopt gender-responsive procurement procedures and contracting.

3.5 Intersectionality and participation of women in all their diversity in public life and decision-making

The representation of women in public life is most meaningful when it reflects women in all their diversity and addresses cross-cutting patterns of inequality across different groups of women. Women are diverse in their social locations, values, economic statuses, political ideologies and in their lived experiences. Policymakers, activists and legislators who wish to progress substantive changes to benefit all women are also challenged to recognize that blindness to the specificities of need, and inequalities between and among differentiated groups of women, can cause more harm than good.

The concept of intersectionality increasingly takes up space in public discourse about women's rights, as well as in its traditional academic home with gender experts. It is widely acknowledged as a critical tool for understanding the diversity of women's needs and how gender connects to other inequalities, oppressions and hierarchies. The practical implications of intersectionality, however, are complex and stakeholders

require practical tools for applying intersectionality in the use of data, the generation of evidence, and the formulation and monitoring of policies.

Intersectionality as a transformative principle is often deployed in response to observed power imbalances and unspoken privileges among groups of women. As noted elsewhere in this report, and mirroring patterns of male leaders, women who manage to access spaces of power, such as those found in formal political processes, overwhelmingly come from political and economic elites. The privileges conferred on elite women often enable them to bypass some of the barriers to women's participation that are prohibitive for many women, such as being able to afford childcare. Questions about the suitability of women leaders are more pronounced the further they stray from elite presentations of leadership – and especially so when such women are racialized. It is worth noting that while less pronounced among men, diversity among male representatives is also low, as they, too, are mostly selected from dominant and privileged ethnic and class groups.

It is critical to support women's full range of perspectives in much the same way that men's are on display. Acknowledging their diversity of values and interests also means challenging assumptions about the relative progressiveness of women. Populist agendas that promote anti-immigration trends and racism can mobilize some women against the needs of other women and thus threaten their human rights. While many women-led movements embrace feminist approaches to organizing and mobilizing for feminist causes, conservative-leaning women have also increased their influence by forming civil society movements and aligning with populist and anti-feminist agendas. For instance, there are notable examples of women leaders in Europe who have faced political penalties for outward expressions of support for some aspects of gender equality but who then championed policies that restrict migrant women's rights. It is vital to promote opportunities for discourse, collaboration and sorority among groups of women and across party lines to uphold human rights for all.

Elitism, and the attendant exclusionary practices of formal political processes, have pushed women, especially those in the margins, to participate in informal spaces. In particular, young women are finding new ways to participate and make their voices heard through online and offline social movements. Levels of informal participation vary from region to region and this might partly be explained by shrinking civil society space and the inability of women to move, assemble and express themselves freely. Backlash and fewer opportunities for transnational networking and power-building have also had a negative impact.²⁸

Social movements have fewer barriers to participation than formal political processes but they are not without their own power imbalances. Leadership and decision-making processes in movements can reflect and reinforce inequalities among women, particularly in contexts where civil society is the preserve of elites. In these contexts, exclusionary colonial legacies often reveal themselves in language, protocols and modes of engagement. It is therefore important for women leaders to actively address issues of power and privilege within their own spheres of influence.

3.5.1 Expert recommendations for intersectionality and the participation of women in all their diversity in public life and decision-making

²⁸ See https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/hassim%20weldon_how%20women%20participate_bp2_csw65egm.pdf?la=en&vs=1527.

- The UN and CSOs should support the development and roll-out of practical tools for applying intersectionality that public institutions, political parties and media can use to strengthen their approaches to gender sensitivity and responsiveness at all levels.
- Women in public life who have influence should avoid replicating and reinforcing social hierarchies and imbalances among women by championing the development, implementation and remedial actions of power analyses in their institutions, political parties, organizations and movements.
- All stakeholders should ensure the inclusion of groups who have historically faced discrimination based on social location and status, addressing the specific challenges that have contributed to their exclusion, which might include but are not limited to:
 - Political parties should provide support to LGBTQI+ women who may face political penalties for coming out;
 - Member States should ensure the visibility and effective participation of indigenous women, addressing their systematic exclusion from participation in public life;
 - Member States, governments at all levels, and political parties should take measures to address the disproportionate levels of violence and discrimination that ethnic minority, Afro-descendent, Dalits and lower caste women leaders face in many countries;
 - Member States, political parties, and CSOs, especially women's rights organizations, should ensure that spaces for participation are fully accessible for women with low levels of formal education and precarious working status;
 - Member States, political parties, and CSOs, especially women's rights organizations, should ensure that spaces for participation are fully accessible for women with disabilities;
 - Member States, political parties, and CSOs should support the development of a pipeline of future women leaders by building the capacity of young women political aspirants and those demonstrating leadership in informal organizing spaces, and by offering mentorship, training and networking opportunities.
- International agencies should ensure youth are supported to participate meaningfully in high level decision-making spaces by providing training and opportunities for young women to be involved as well as seeing to it that their contributions can be followed up.
- International agencies should strengthen transnational, multigenerational feminist organizing and solidarity by providing regional and international platforms and creating channels for intergenerational feminist dialogues.
- All spheres of government should commit to gender parity in youth parliaments and councils at national and local levels including using quotas where relevant and ensuring all members receive gender equality training.
- Governments at national and local levels should encourage and sustain young women's representation in public administration by instituting capacity development programmes for young women employees and volunteers.
- International agencies and CSOs should support the dynamism of feminist movements and young women activists who struggle to sustain their work through traditional NGO funding mechanisms by creating and supporting existing flexible funds.

3.6 Women's transformative decision-making for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls

Women's impact in decision-making for gender equality outcomes, specifically within legislative and executive branches, is an emerging area of interest. The extent to which institutions that are neither gender-sensitive nor gender-responsive can impede women's ability to contribute to, and shape, decision-making remains an area of concern. As noted above, not all women leaders prioritize gender equality; however, research suggests a correlation between increased numbers of women in office and the likelihood of both gender-sensitive public policies and practices within institutions.²⁹

Areas where women's engagement and greater representation in decision-making bodies has been shown to make a substantive impact include measures promoting gender balance – like quotas; the elimination of gender-based violence; women's reproductive rights; work-family policies, such as parental leave and childcare; and social security, including pensions. These changes have been pursued not only by women in the legislative branch, but also through women's representation in cabinets and in administrative bodies, at all levels of decision-making and government.

Women's participation also has a symbolic impact, as it can improve perceptions of democracy, influence traditional concepts of gender roles and, through a 'role model effect', encourage more women to participate in politics or seek public office. The invaluable role of women's networks – both among women politicians and those that link elected women with feminist CSOs – was highlighted as critical for including voices of vulnerable and marginalized groups in decision-making and to advancing transformative feminist and gender equality policy agendas.

The responsibility for gender equality should not fall solely to women decision-makers but rather taken on as a shared responsibility between women and men leaders as well as the institutions in which they serve. Men in power need to make space available for women to take up leadership roles so that balance is achieved. Political parties have great responsibility in reducing obstacles and supporting women leaders. Indeed, institutional cultures and environments were raised as major impediments to women's ability to shape decision-making for gender equality. In particular, incidents of sexism, harassment and gender-based violence take many forms but can affect all women in decision-making positions. Such incidents also create barriers for women – and men – to effect change. In this regard, structural reforms should be targeted to ensure safe decision-making environments, i.e. gender-responsive and gender-sensitive spaces and institutions with sanctions and zero tolerance for gender discrimination and violence against women.

The particularly transformative power of gender-sensitive parliaments specifically,³⁰ and public institutions more broadly, was highlighted by experts as a framework that builds on the premise of gender equality, equal opportunities, and participation rights across all structures. This framework would help deliver gender-responsive outcomes and that address gender-based violence against elected women, women presidents, mayors and parliamentarians, parliamentary staff and other public officials within all spheres of government.

²⁹ See https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/piscopo_women%20impact_ep13_egmcsw65.pdf?la=en&vs=542.

³⁰ See <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reference/2016-07/plan-action-gender-sensitive-parliaments>.

3.6.1 Expert recommendations on women's transformative decision-making for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls

- Legislatures (including parliaments and local deliberative bodies) should strive towards gender-sensitivity and gender-responsiveness, including by incorporating established tools³¹ to assess achievements and gaps, identify and remedy patterns of exclusion, and support the elimination of discrimination and violence against women at all levels. Best practices in designing gender-sensitive parliaments, well-documented by international agencies and academic and research institutions, provide useful examples and tools.
- Member States, local and regional governments, and political parties, with the support of international agencies as needed, should build gender-sensitive and gender-responsive institutions by using intersectional gender audits of women's representation and leadership at all levels of government and making that data widely available and communicated to CSOs, movements, journalists, and the public.
- Governments and legislatures, with support from international agencies, should support women within institutions by assisting in the creation and functioning of formal networks and bodies for women office holders, such as women's caucuses, cross-party women's wings or standing committees on women and gender equality.
- Legislatures, through women's caucuses and networks, and CSOs should strengthen feminist policy agenda-setting and implementation by facilitating links and relationships between officeholders and women in progressive civil society groups and movements, as well as with supportive male representatives and other allies. This should be done while also setting sensitive and realistic expectations about the extent to which women officeholders can push feminist agendas from inside institutions.
- Parliaments should call upon women's rights organizations to participate in formal oversight and law-making processes, including hearings and inquiries on a variety of policy issues.
- Governments and legislatures should create forums that elevate women's voices and policy interests through, for example, public events and special hearings with women's organizations and women office holders, caucuses and/or gender equality committees, while recognizing intersectional challenges and diversity among women.
- Governments, political parties and CSOs should develop, implement and keep databanks of supportive measures for gender equality and the broader engagement of women in public life. They can do this by providing gender-sensitive training and capacity-building for those with the power to be women's allies – in particular men – and influence institutions and decision-making, especially by targeting men within these institutions.
- Academic and research institutions, and CSOs – including religious and cultural organizations where relevant – should include more women in their decision-making and advisory bodies by adopting internal regulations and using TSMs and programmes to recruit and support women's participation.

³¹ See <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/toolkits/2016-11/evaluating-gender-sensitivity-parliaments-self-assessment-toolkit>.

- Peacebuilding stakeholders should ensure that they actively engage women in decision-making as part of peacetime political transformation from conflict to institution-building and as part of efforts to sustain peace.
- Member States and international agencies should coordinate and cooperate in their assessment and data gathering of impacts, responses and interventions – related to crises like COVID-19 – on women’s participation and leadership. For instance, they can examine how working from home has different impacts on women parliamentarians than men.