

Area G — Women in power and decision-making: slow and uneven progress

Introduction

Recent years have seen considerable focus on the representation of women in political and economic decision-making by EU institutions. Both the European Parliament and the European Commission put in place actions to encourage politicians in the Member States to introduce measures to improve and accelerate gender balance in political and economic leadership positions.

In 2017, for example, the European Parliament called on Member States to guarantee gender parity in leadership positions in the government, in public institutions and on electoral lists. Special emphasis has been given to the use of quotas (enforced by legislation and sanctions) to promote gender equality in decision-making. Member States have been encouraged to introduce (legally binding) quotas in their public and private sectors, including government, public institutions, electoral lists and corporate boards.

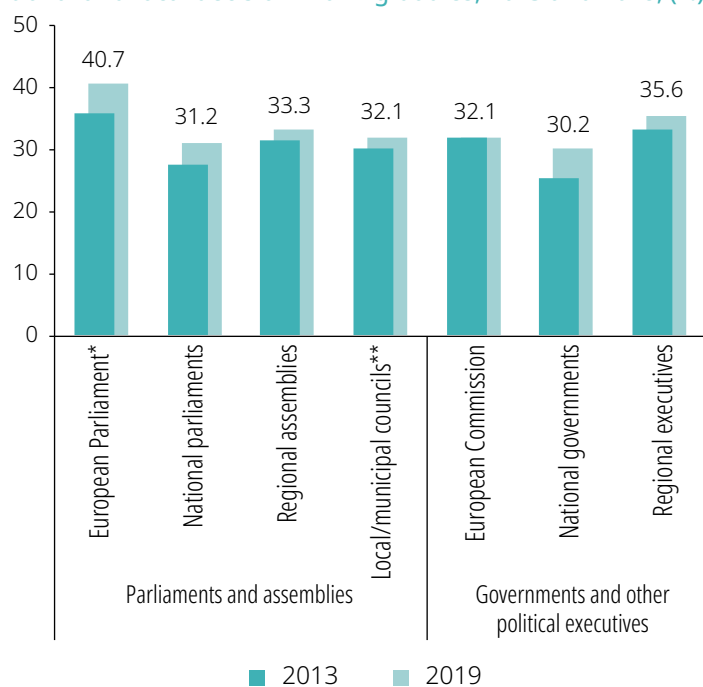
The European Commission has continued to promote gender balance in political and public decision-making positions through its strategic engagement for gender equality 2016-2019 and its own target to achieve 40 % representation of women in senior and middle management within its institutions by 2019. It also proposed Directive 2012/0299, which would have obliged Member States to achieve at least 40 % representation of women and men among non-executive directors of listed companies, but this initiative has been blocked so far in the Council of the EU.

More generally, since 2013, the EU has strengthened its policies to tackle the structural barriers that prevent women from entering decision-making positions, most notably the unequal sharing of care responsibilities. Notable improvements have also been seen in the collection, analysis and dissemination of the EU-wide data on women and men in decision-making. Currently, these data are presented in EIGE's Gender Statistics Database and cover more than 100 indicators.



Gender quotas often drive change in political and economic decision-making

Figure 1. Proportion of women among members of EU, national and local decision-making bodies, 2013 and 2018, (%)



(*) The data cover the latest European Parliament elections in 2019.

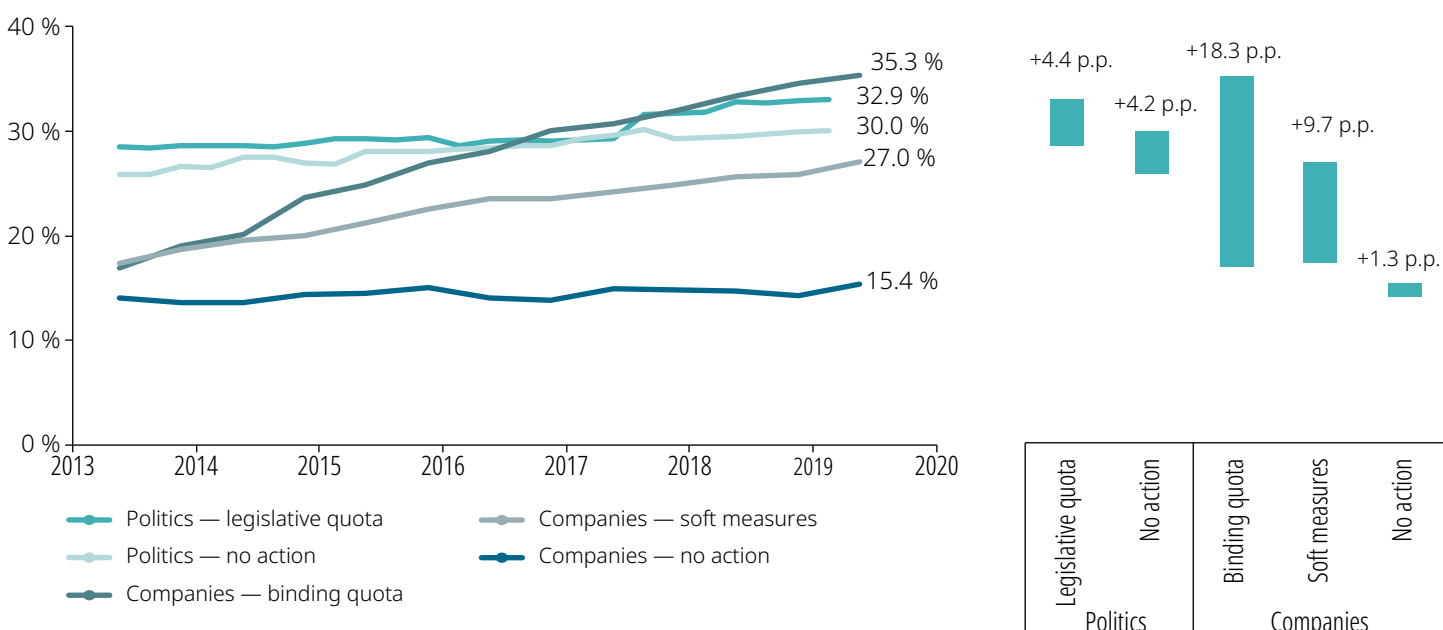
(**) Local assemblies data refer to 2013 and 2017.

Despite general support for the equal participation of women and men, and some progress in the average proportion of women in national and local decision-making, men still dominate most spheres in which important decisions are taken in the EU and Member States.

In 2018, women typically comprised no more than one in three of those in EU, national and local political decision-making bodies, except in the European Parliament and among regional executives, where their representation was somewhat stronger (see Figure 1). Notably, after the 2019 elections, for the first time in its history women accounted for more than 40 % of Members of the European Parliament.

National parliaments and governments show the weakest representation of women, although these vary significantly by Member State. Several EU Member States have a long tradition of equality, with some (such as Spain, France, Finland and Sweden) almost achieving parity in some areas of decision-making. Other Member States (such as Greece, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Hungary, Malta, Romania and Slovakia), however, continue to lag substantially behind; this has a direct impact on the quality and representativeness of national democracy, as well as how policies are prepared and implemented.

Figure 2. Percentage of women among members of single/lower houses of parliaments and board members of the largest listed companies by legislative/soft actions in place, EU-28, 2013-2019



Sources: EIGE's Gender Statistics Database and desk research

Notes: Legislative quotas for parliamentary elections: BE, IE, EL, ES, FR, HR, IT, PL, PT, SI. Binding quotas for companies: BE, DE, FR, IT, AT, PT. Soft measures for companies: DK, IE, EL, ES, LU, NL, PL, SI, FI, SE, UK.

Women are even more poorly represented within economic decision-making. In some positions, for example in high executive functions of companies (i.e. presidents and chief executives) or as governors of central banks, the proportion of women across the EU is less than 10 %. These very low levels of representation testify to the many persistent barriers that make it difficult for women to enter and remain active in top economic decision-making positions.

In both political and economic areas, the level of women's representation is generally improving, albeit very slowly and

unevenly. Where women's representation has been boosted over the past 5 years, this has not happened by chance. Rather, legislation and other government actions have helped to stimulate change. The most recent example of such success is the percentage of women on the boards of large companies across the EU. Since April 2013, it has almost doubled, from 16.6 % to 27.7 % in April 2019. Although an EU directive has yet to be agreed, the evidence at Member State level clearly shows that legislative action can accelerate progress (see Figure 2).

Women continue to face a range of structural barriers to reach top positions

The challenges in achieving gender balance in decision-making are many and complex. Although the combination of barriers facing women can vary substantially by area of activity, there are some that apply in a fairly broad range of settings.

- The unequal sharing of household and care responsibilities between women and men remains a key barrier preventing women from entering positions of power.
- Cultures of long working hours, volatile and/or hostile working environments and a lack of development opportunities also represent disincentives for women to enter positions of power.
- Evidence suggests that women are assessed differently from men, whether as potential candidates for leadership or in decision-making positions. Women in power may face the double bind of needing to demonstrate leadership qualities typically associated with men, while simultaneously conforming to the

expected characteristics of women (such as being warm and communal). This can often lead to gender biases in promotions.

- Gender stereotypes continue to cast a long shadow, underpinning many of the above inequalities.

Other barriers are more specific to particular fields of decision-making. For example in politics, women face important initial barriers to entry: it is more difficult for them to access financing and they also have less influence on candidate selection procedures (for example, it is often difficult for women to get a stronger position on the election list). In addition to long-standing forms of gender-based violence, there is also an increasing concern about online harassment directed against female politicians.

These challenges, combined with the lack of effort by some Member States, political parties and leaderships to put in place relevant measures, substantially impede women's attainment of decision-making positions.

Recommendations for action

At EU level, it is necessary to ensure that the issue of women in power and decision-making remains high on the political agenda, with EU institutions serving as a role model to stimulate and persuade reluctant Member States to adopt binding measures. When selecting EU commissioners, for example, the request of the new European Commission for Member States to propose one woman and one man as a candidate to ensure a gender-balanced college of commissioners is a good start.

A broad range of legislative and non-legislative measures to improve gender balance in decision-making (such as binding gender quotas or voluntary softer measures) should be considered at EU and Member State levels, especially in sectors where women are typically under-represented in decision-making positions. These measures should set targets to achieve gender balance, with clearly defined timelines and adequate sanctions for non-compliance. They should cover

especially those sectors/positions where women are most under-represented, including in economic and business decision-making positions, politics and public life, sports and the diplomatic sector.

The EU and its Member States would benefit from a broader institutional and structural transformation to foster inclusivity and gender balance in the long term. This involves removing barriers that impede women's progression, especially those connected to work-life balance, long working hours and persistent gender stereotypes. Actions to combat gender-based violence against women in public life, including through the media (for example psychological violence, cyberharassment and sexual harassment), are an important element of such work.

Further research is needed on how to close gender gaps in decision-making and ensure that balanced numbers among decision-makers translate into good representation of the in-

terests of each gender. Continued efforts to collect and use robust data on women and men in decision-making, currently

presented in EIGE's Gender Statistics Database, are an important prerequisite for this.

Further information

Several other challenges are evident in the area of women in power and decision-making. Men dominate many other sectors that are less visible on the policy agenda, such as the media, judiciary, environment, sports and diplomatic sectors. Even when women gain a seat at the table, their contributions may not be heard or acknowledged to the same degree as those of their male peers. There is a range of potential benefits associated with achieving more gender-balanced decision-making processes.

Further information on EU policy developments and trends related to women in power and decision-making can be found in EIGE's Beijing + 25 report. Some other policy briefs based on this report also present challenges that are closely related to women in power and decision-making (such as Area F, Women and the economy, Area H, Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, and Area J, Women and the media).

EIGE regularly produces reports reviewing different areas of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) or other EU policy priorities, as requested by the presidencies of the Council of the European Union. This factsheet is based on the report *Beijing + 25: The fifth review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the EU Member States*, prepared at the request of Finland's Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Other publications include:

- [Tackling the Gender Pay Gap: Not without a better work-life balance](#) (2019)
- [Gender Equality and Youth: Opportunities and risks of digitalisation](#) (2019)
- [Women and Men in ICT: A chance for better work-life balance](#) (2018)
- [Study and Work in the EU: Set apart by gender](#) (2018)

You can explore all of EIGE's previous BPfA reports and publications at <https://eige.europa.eu/beijing-platform-for-action>

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