

Gender-sensitive Parliaments

Domain 1 – Electoral system and gender quotas

This domain assesses the extent to which the national electoral system is gender-sensitive and explores whether and how gender quotas are applied.

The existence of a legal framework that supports equal representation of women and men and an electoral system that facilitates equal access is a pre-condition to the establishment of gender-sensitive public institutions, like parliaments.

The basic (although not itself sufficient) element assuring women and men equal influence on the parliament's work is their numeric balance. Numbers of women in parliaments are collected regularly worldwide (IPU Database), and the share of seats in parliament is a widely used indicator of women's (descriptive) political representation. A gender-sensitive electoral system can act as a pathway towards a more balanced representation in parliament.

Special legal and policy measures to strengthen women's representation and influence in political and public life (OSCE: 2017a) can help to increase women's chances of entering parliaments.

Gender quotas, as a form of affirmative action supporting women to overcome obstacles to their entry into parliamentary assemblies, are the most widespread measure used. Different types of quotas (i.e. voluntary or legislated) and different application methods exist (e.g. fixed share of women in lists, zipping).

Read more about electoral systems and quota effectiveness

The design of the quota system according to certain rules that match the electoral system (e.g. in relation to the placement or ranking of women and men on candidate lists) is central to achieving a positive impact and ensuring effectiveness. Quotas are easier to implement in proportional representation systems with large, multiple member districts than in majority/plurality systems with single member districts, where it is easier for parties to influence who is selected to stand in winnable constituencies (IPU/IDEA: 2013). Another crucial issue to consider here is whether women candidates are placed in winnable positions on lists or within districts.

As EIGE (2020, forthcoming) noted, gender quotas can help to bring about rapid change, albeit not always as quickly or as dramatically as might be expected. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of quota provisions depends on the existence of institutional bodies that supervise the application of those quotas and enforce sanctions for non-compliance (European Commission for democracy through law (Venice Commission: 2015; OECD: 2016; IPU/IDEA: 2013).

A major barrier to women's equal entry to parliament – and thus contributing to women's under-representation – is unequal access *to the resources needed* to successfully seek nominations or participate in electoral campaigns (International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics: 2018; IPU: 2008; UN WOMEN and UNDP: 2015).

Read more about how political parties can increase women's representation in parliaments

EIGE (2020, forthcoming) noted that the representation of women in politics depends in part on the actions of political parties, which determine the selection of candidates for election and their position on candidate lists or within constituencies. This is significant, as it means that political parties can actively support women's participation by promoting women's candidacies, supporting their electoral campaigns and reinforcing their capacities once elected. However, although many parties adopt and apply voluntary gender quotas for candidates, this does not automatically lead to more visibility for women candidates unless there is relevant legislation that makes this practice compulsory (EIGE: 2020, forthcoming).

During the pre-electoral period, a party may implement specific measures to assure the presence of women. Alongside establishing candidate quotas, a party can ensure the placement of women in winnable positions and allocate funds for targeted training.

During the electoral campaign, the party may provide training and mentorship to women candidates, assure their visibility, include women's priorities on its platform, and provide funding support, such as women's funding networks, internal party funds for women candidates and targeted subsidies.
