

Gender-sensitive Parliaments

Domain 1 – Parliamentarians’ presence and capacity in a parliament

This domain addresses gender balance in leading roles and internal working groups.

The basic (although not itself sufficient) element assuring women and men equal influence on the parliament’s work is their numeric balance. To be able to influence the parliament’s work, a sufficient number of women must be in leadership roles.

Despite gradual advances, women’s presence in EU Member State parliaments remains low. An important aspect of this presence is ‘where’ elected women are assigned to work (i.e. in which roles and positions). As stated by the IPU (2011), ‘Once in parliament, women need to hold positions of power and authority’. This implies a need to analyse the composition of the parliament’s leading roles, committees and other internal working groups.

Read more about women and leading positions in parliament

When elected to political institutions, women are less likely than men to be appointed to a leading role – a phenomenon that is called ‘vertical segregation’. The most prominent leading positions in parliament are speakers or presidents and these are rarely women: in the first quarter of 2019, there were only six women speakers/presidents in the EU-28 parliaments (Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, Latvia, Netherlands, Spain) (EIGE Gender Statistics Database).

The other influential leading position is within a parliament’s committee chairs. The ‘backbone’ of parliamentary work, committees, are governed by a set of both formal and unwritten rules that affect their composition and work. The evidence suggests that women tend to be allocated to portfolios that are considered to have lower political priority. Monitoring should cover not only the proportion of committees led by women but also the topic and effective influence of these committees in the overall parliamentary work.

Women are more likely to be relegated to traditionally 'soft' portfolio areas – welfare and family policies, employment, health, culture and education – while men generally lead committees dealing with 'hard' economic and internal topics – budgetary and financial policies, economic development and trade, home affairs, defence and security, and foreign affairs (IPU: 2011). This effect is described as 'horizontal segregation' (Krook and O'Brien: 2012). This hierarchy of portfolios is itself highly gendered, as it reflects the traditionally gendered division of labour within which women should contribute mostly in areas related to 'care' (IPU: 2011). Gender-sensitive parliaments promote the idea that all policy areas are important for everyone and act to avoid dominance of a single gender in specific policy areas. Balanced participation of women and men MPs in every parliamentary committee or working group is fruitful for gender equality, as women and men may bring different perspectives.

Read more about women and men's policy portfolios in practice

Renman and Conroy (2014) highlighted that in the European Parliament after the 2014 elections, the overall representation was accompanied by low levels of women in influential positions. The authors analysed the leadership and composition of European Parliament committees and assessed their political influence by calculating the number of Ordinary Legislative Procedures proposed and completed. Of the four most influential committees in the 7th term (Environment, Public Health and Food Security, Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, Economic and Monetary Affairs, and International Trade), only one was chaired by a woman. As for committees' composition, women were equally, or predominantly, represented in only four out of 19 (Employment and Social Affairs; Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, Women's Rights and Gender Equality, and Petitions) (Renman and Conroy: 2014).

Across the EU, in 2019, women accounted for 17.9 % of presidents of national parliaments and 23 % of members of committees across the EU. Similarly, less than one-third of women were members of parliamentary bureaux (32.2 %), while women presidents of bureaux equated to 17.1 % in 2019 (EIGE Gender Statistics Database, WMID).

Attention should be given to the procedures through which the parliament decides on a committee's composition. In Europe, this is often dictated by customs related to proportionate seat distribution and/or parties' strategies in the parliament.