

# Gender-sensitive Parliaments

## Self-assessment, scoring and interpretation of parliament gender-sensitivity

In order to make gender-sensitivity a measurable concept, five areas defining specific aspects of parliaments' gender-sensitivity have been identified through literature and further developed in line with experts' recommendations.

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### Read more about how the tool was developed

Work on the gender-sensitive parliaments' tool began in 2015 with an extensive literature review of the concept of 'gender-sensitive parliaments' and the key dimensions for women's full participation in the political sphere, as well as a review of the work of other organisations in the field. The tool draws on a framework on gender-sensitive parliaments developed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Reports, data and materials from other international organisations (such as the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN WOMEN), Organisation for Security and Co-operation's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE-ODIHR)) were reviewed, in addition to academic sources and research published at national level (see the ['References'](#) section in the online Tool).

EIGE also organised several expert consultation meetings to discuss and validate the proposed measurement framework (September 2016), and the scoring system (April 2017). EIGE pilot tested the tool with parliaments (November 2017), with final improvements (June 2018) based on the recommendations of parliament representatives.

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The five areas aim to address the complex and multifaceted nature of the concept of gender-sensitivity within parliaments. Each area is further divided into domains, sub-domains and distinct indicators, with relevant questions to assess the level of gender-sensitivity within a particular area or activity. The indicators and questions were selected because they allow the objective measurement of policies and interventions to enhance gender equality in a parliament's work and outputs.

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## Read more about the main concepts behind the tool

The tool draws on the three main dimensions considered essential for women's full participation in the political sphere:

**Descriptive representation** is 'the extent to which a representative resembles those being represented' (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). An elected parliamentary assembly should mirror the composition of society through corresponding numbers of elected women and men. 'Critical mass' theory implies that for women to be influential in political decision-making, numbers matter (Childs and Krook: 2008) - women need to move from a small to a large minority in parliaments (Dahlerup: 2006). 30 % or 40 % are typically used as the benchmark for an 'acceptable' presence of women in parliaments (Barnes and Munn-Rivard: 2012). The roles women have in the elected assemblies also matter, i.e. the policy areas to which they are assigned, and whether or not they reach leadership positions. Descriptive representation also considers how women can access elected assemblies, encompassing both the equality of electoral systems and political parties' procedures.

**Substantive representation** goes beyond the presence of women in parliaments and is defined as 'the activity of representatives – that is, the actions taken on behalf of, in the interest of, as an agent of, and as a substitute for the represented' (Barnes and Munn-Rivard: 2012). This dimension addresses parliamentary procedures (how representatives work) and outcomes (the result of representatives' work) (Childs and Lovenduski: 2013), and it explores if and how elected assemblies represent women's interests and needs, irrespective of their composition.

The definition of 'women's interests' is much-debated in feminist political research. Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson (2014) stress that substantive representation deals with issues whose importance is often context-dependent. For example, the gender pay gap may be a common women's interest in the EU, while in other parts of the world, women may struggle to inherit property. Celis et al. (2014) distinguish between '*women's issues*' – typically policies referring to women, such as reproductive rights, equal pay, violence against women, education, women's health, maternity leave, childcare, and legal issues surrounding marriage and divorce - and '*women's interests*', i.e. 'what women want'. Elected groups do not necessarily express women's interests, while women's groups – grounded in women's collective mobilisation – are likely to articulate more comprehensive and varied sets of issues and interests (Celis, Childs, et al.: 2014). This highlights one role of gender analysis in politics, which is to explore the direct needs of women, as well as strategic interests.

Many authors argue that what matters in parliaments are 'critical acts' (Asiedu, Branstette, et al.: 2018; Dahlerup: 1988; Lovenduski: 2001): different critical masses are needed depending on the outcome sought, so women holding 15 % of the seats in a political body can change the political agenda but they will need a proportion of 40 % of seats to pass women-friendly policies (Grey: 2006). For Dahlerup (1988), 'A critical act is one which will change the position of the minority considerably and lead to further changes'. Critical actors do not need to be women; in some situations, men may play a crucial role in advancing women's policy concerns (Childs and Krook: 2009).

**Symbolic representation** is defined as 'the ways that a representative "stands for" the represented – that is, the meaning that a representative has for those being represented' (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Symbolic representation focuses on the way in which symbols represent someone or something – in this case, women and political power. It is a broad area of research and can refer, for example, to the analysis of women role models in politics (European Parliament Think Tank: 2019), and the symbolic meanings embedded in parliaments, such as the names of physical premises (the parliament building and the rooms; artwork). In the latter strand, a symbol is considered to be an image or object (e.g. a painting or statue) that suggests or refers to something else, so that it evokes or suggests a meaning, belief, feeling, and value that is related and appropriate to the subject presented (Lombardo and Meier: 2014; Stokke and Selboe: 2009).

The Tool also draws on Wägnerud's (2015) approach, which suggests that characteristics inside a parliament help to translate descriptive representation into substantive representation for women, using three guiding principles:

- Implementation of equal opportunities for women and men to influence internal

- parliamentary working procedures;
- Provision of generous space on the parliamentary agenda for women's interests and concerns;
- Gender-sensitive legislation as the outcome of parliamentary debate.

This approach highlights that parliaments' gender-sensitivity has two aspects:

- 1 | *Inward-oriented elements* - parliaments are working organisations for elected members and employed staff, with rules, norms, internal procedures, bodies and culture that have an impact on gender equality; and
- 2 | *outward-oriented elements* - parliaments are legislative bodies that impact on citizens' lives.

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Explore the description of the [full set of indicators and the approach to scoring](#) (pdf).