

Women in local government [UN Women]



Background

Women's access to local government positions is a right and a necessary condition for ensuring the inclusion of women's interests and perspectives in local decision-making

Women's rights to political participation on equal terms with men and to shared power between women and men in decision-making bodies at all levels of government have been recognized in international normative frameworks¹ and emphasized in the Beijing Platform for Action.²

While the majority of research and global data collection on women's representation in decision-making positions has been focused on national parliaments, the inclusion of women in local governments positions in the SDG monitoring framework acknowledges the importance of a whole-of-government approach to sustainable development and of women's voices and leadership at the local as well as the national levels of government.

Women in local government decision-making positions represent a much more numerous and diverse group, and research shows that they redefine local priorities by being more inclusive,³ prioritizing family-friendly policies⁴ and, in some contexts, contributing to increased gender equality in terms of policymaking on income, employment and parental leave.⁵

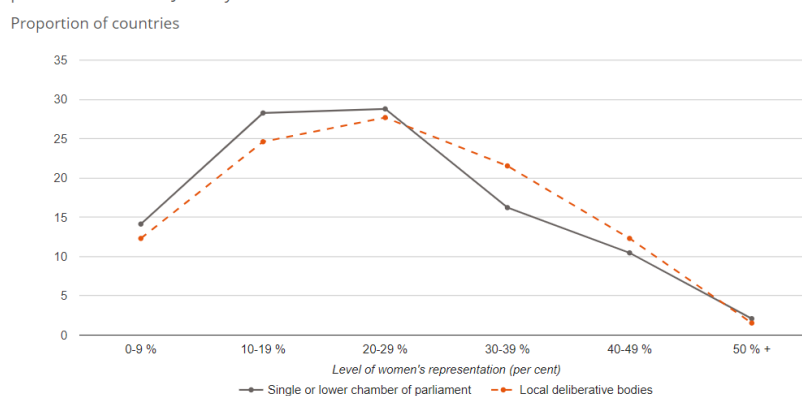
Current situation

Women's representation in local deliberative bodies is higher than in national parliaments, but still not on equal terms with men

As at 1 January 2020, as shown in the data available for 133 countries and areas worldwide, women held 36% of elected seats in local deliberative bodies. While women's representation at the local level was higher than in national parliaments (25%),⁶ it was not yet close to parity.

Women's representation in local deliberative bodies was at 40% or above in only a minority of countries (15%). In the majority of countries (53%), levels of women's representation were reported at levels between 10% and 30%, and in 12% of countries women's representation was less than 10%, a distribution similar to that observed for women's representation in national parliaments (see figure I).

Figure I: Proportion of countries by level of women's representation in local deliberative bodies and parliaments: as at 1 January 2020



Source: UN-Women, data on women's representation in parliament is based on, "Women in National Parliaments", the statistical archive of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (<http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/world-arc.htm>).

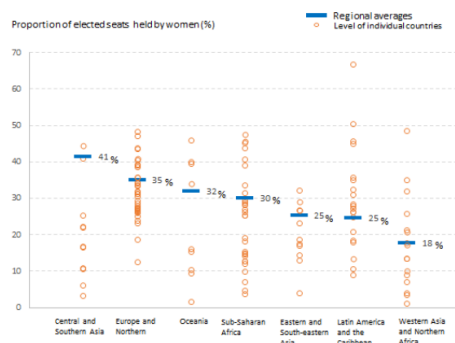
Women's representation in local deliberative bodies varies widely across and within regions

Women's representation is highest in countries in the Central and Southern Asia (41%) and Europe and Northern America (35%) regions, driven, in particular, by high levels of women's representation in countries with large numbers of councillors, such as France and India, while lowest in countries in the Northern Africa and Western Asia (18%) region (see figure II).

Nevertheless, there are countries with gender-balanced local deliberative bodies in almost all regions. Women's representation is over 40%, for example, in: Antigua and Barbuda (67%) and Bolivia (Plurinational State of) (50%) in Latin America and the Caribbean; Belarus (48%) and Iceland (47%) in Europe; Uganda (46%) in Africa; New Caledonia (46%) in Oceania; and India (44%) in Central and Southern Asia.

Figure II: Proportion of elected seats held by women in local deliberative bodies by region and country: as at 1 January 2020

Proportion of countries



Source: UN-Women

Note: Each circle represents a country; regional averages (weighted by number of local government members) are represented with a blue line.

High levels of women's representation have been reached, in the majority of cases, by means of legislated quotas

The use of legislated gender quotas has increased women's representation in local governments, particularly in developing regions. Legislated gender quotas are temporary special measures provided for in national legal frameworks for the purpose of correcting historical trends in numerical gender imbalance and fast tracking the increased representation of women.

Worldwide, countries with legislated quotas have higher levels of women's representation in local government (by 7% on average) compared to those without quotas.⁷ Increases resulting from the adoption of quotas are higher in countries in developing regions (11%), particularly in countries in sub-Saharan Africa (16%) and Northern Africa and Western Asia (13%).

About the data

Coverage

The indicator uses official data on elections results produced by national electoral management bodies and reported to the United Nations Entity on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) by national statistical offices. As at 1 January 2020, data were available for 133 countries and areas, including three quarters of all countries with elected local deliberative bodies.⁸

Definitions

- Proportion of women in local government is measured as the percentage of elected seats held by women in deliberative bodies of local governments (Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, indicator 5.5.1(b))⁹. The indicator complements SDG indicator 5.5.1(a) on women's representation in national legislative bodies (specifically in the single or lower chambers of parliaments) by focusing on women's representation among the millions of members of local deliberative bodies with decision-making power around the world.
- Local government represents a decentralization of legislative, executive and administrative powers from the national to local levels, which enables improved governance on local matters and the more direct and inclusive participation of different groups of the population in local decision-making.

Related stories and further reading

- [Women in national parliaments](#)
- [Women in national parliaments and local governments in Mexico](#)
- [Women in politics and decision-making positions in Africa](#)
- See also: United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), "Women in local government: A data brief" (UN-Women policy brief series (forthcoming)).

Footnotes

1. Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1953), General Assembly resolution 640 (VII), art. II and III; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), General Assembly resolution 2200 (XXI), art.2 and 25; and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), General Assembly resolution 34/180, art. 3 and 7.
2. [Beijing Platform for Action, strategic objectives G.1 and G.2.](#)
3. Kathlene, L., "Power and influence in state legislative policy-making: The interaction of gender and position in committee hearing debates", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 88, No. 3, 1994; Tilly, L.A. and Gurin, P. (eds.), *Women, Politics and Change*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 1992; Weikart, L.A., Chen, G., Williams, D.W. and Hromic, H., "The Democratic Sex: Gender Differences and the Exercise of Power", *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, vol. 28, Issue 1, 2006..
4. Chattopadhyay, R. and Duflo, E., "Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India", *Econometrica*, vol. 72, No.5, 2004; Bratton, K. and Ray, L., "Descriptive Representation, Policy Outcomes, and Municipal Day-Care coverage in Norway", *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 46, No.2, 2002; Holman, M. R., "Sex and the city: Female leaders and spending on social welfare programs in U.S. municipalities", *Journal of Urban Affairs*, vol. 36, Issue 4, 2013; Smith, A., "Cities Where Women Rule: Female Political Incorporation and the Allocation of Community Development Block Grant Funding", *Politics & Gender*, vol. 10, Issue 3, 2014; Svaleryd, H., "Women's representation and public spending", *European Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 25, Issue 2, 2009; Funk, K.D. and Philips, A.Q., "Representative Budgeting: Women Mayors and the Composition of Spending in Local Governments", *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 72, Issue 1, 2018.
5. Wängnerud, L. and Sundell, A., "Do Politics Matter? Women in Swedish Local Elected Assemblies 1970–2010 and Gender Equality in Outcomes", *European Political Science Review*, vol. 4, Issue 1, 2012.
6. [Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Women in National Parliaments", statistical archive.](#)
7. Unweighted averages.
8. [Metadata on indicator 5.5.1 \(b\).](#)
9. [United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs \(UNDESA\), Statistics Division, "Global SDG Indicators Database".](#)