

Power and decision making

Women in national parliaments



Key points

- In 2020, women are free under the law to participate in political activity in all countries worldwide, although significant obstacles to their effective access to parliament remain, including: gender stereotypes; unequal access to resources and education; unequal social and legal status; and violence and harassment perpetrated against women in politics and women aspirants to political office.
- Despite these challenges, there has been a continuous improvement in women's access to parliament, with slow but steady progress in representation over the past 25 years. From 1995 to 2020, the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women rose from 11.3% to 24.9%. Improvement appears to have slowed down, however, since 2015 – and currently, in 2020, women hold at least 50% of the seats in only four national parliaments.
- From the regional perspective, major milestones have been achieved in recent years in Australia and New Zealand, Latin America and the Caribbean and Europe and Northern America. However, Oceania, excluding Australia and New Zealand, continues to lag behind, with only 6% of parliamentary seats being held by women.
- To a large extent such progress is the result of the introduction of targeted policy and legal measures to increase women's representation in national parliaments. Of the 20 countries with the highest percentages of women in parliament, 16 apply some type of gender quota.
- Few women in politics reach the higher echelons of parliamentary hierarchies, particularly at the top levels as president or speaker of the house. Although the percentage of female presiding officers of parliament almost doubled, from 10.5% in 1995 to 20.5% in 2020, it is still too low to influence policymaking effectively.
- Women continue to be underrepresented in key decision-making positions in parliaments, with the exception of gender equality committees, 73% of which are chaired by women.

Background

Women's representation in national parliaments and in key decision-making positions in parliament is an essential aspect of their participation in political and public life: their representation is a human right and a prerequisite for genuine democracy,¹ sustainable development and peace.² The inclusion of the perspectives and interests of women contributes to good governance and gender equality in society.

A stronger presence of women in parliament and in parliamentary leadership allows for the prominent placement of their concern on political agendas, and for the introduction of fresh priorities through the adoption and implementation of policies and laws relevant to women's issues.³ The full political participation of women requires that they occupy key positions of influence, as envisioned by the Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments adopted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2012.⁴

Current situation

In 2020, women are free under the law to participate in political activity in all countries worldwide, although significant obstacles to their effective access to parliament remain.

Women face discrimination within the family, the economy and society, as well as under the law. A male-dominated political culture, persisting gender stereotypes that confine women to the private sphere, unequal access to resources and education, unequal social and legal status and violence and harassment perpetrated against women in politics and as aspirants to political office need to be tackled in order to ensure that women have the same opportunities as men to access political office.⁵

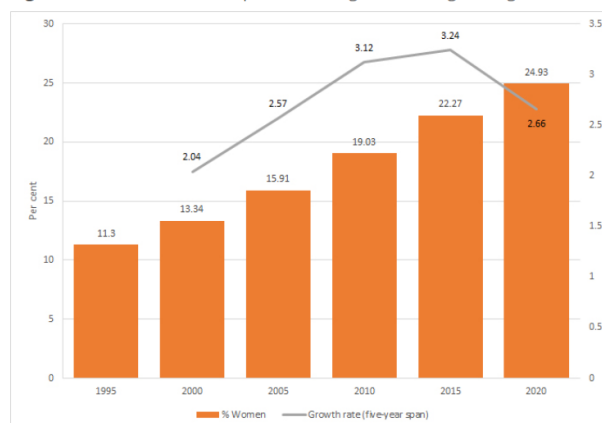
As emphasized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, increasing attention has been paid to instances of sexism, harassment and

gender-based violence against women parliamentarians that may dissuade other women from pursuing a political career and undermine the full participation of women elected to parliament in decision-making processes.⁶

Despite these challenges, there has been a continuous improvement in women's access to parliament, with slow but steady progress in representation over the past 25 years.

From 1995 to 2020, the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women rose from 11.3% to 24.9%, and up until 2015, progress in women's representation was continuous over each successive 5-year span, reaching a growth rate of 3.2% between 2010 and 2015. However, from 2015 and 2020, the rate of increase slowed down to 2.7% (see figure I).

Figure I: Women in national parliaments, global average and growth rate: 1995 to 2020



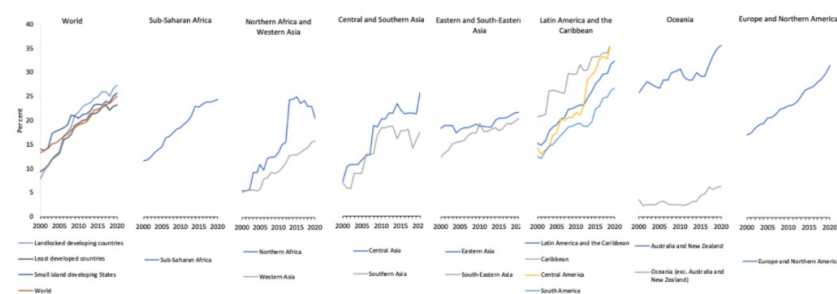
Source: Compiled by the United Nations Statistics Division based on data provided by IPU for single and lower houses.

Note: Data as of 1 February each year, except for 1995 (1 July).

From the regional perspective, major milestones have been achieved in recent years in Australia and New Zealand, Latin America and the Caribbean and Europe and Northern America. In 2017, Australia and New Zealand surpassed the 30% mark in the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women for the second time, after first reaching that threshold in 2010. In 2019, Latin America and the Caribbean became the second region to surpass the 30% mark, followed by the Europe and Northern America region in 2020.

In 2020, the share of women in national parliaments was the highest in Australia and New Zealand (35.1%), followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (32.1%), Europe and Northern America (31%) and Central Asia (25.4%). The other regions were below the global average, significantly so in Western Asia (15.6%), Southern Asia (17.3%), South-Eastern Asia (20.4%) and Eastern Asia (21.6%). Moreover, although minor improvements have been noted over time, the lowest share of women in parliament, 6.2%, continues to be in the Oceania region, excluding Australia and New Zealand.

Figure II: Proportion of seats held by women in single or lower houses of parliament, by region: 2000–2020



Source: Compiled and calculated by the United Nations Statistics Division based on data obtained from the Sustainable Development Goals database (<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/>) (last accessed 10 July 2020).

To a large extent such progress is the result of the introduction of targeted policy and legal measures to increase women's representation in national parliaments. Countries that have adopted special measures generally have higher numbers of women in parliament. While in 1995 only two countries had adopted legislation ensuring gender quotas⁷ for parliamentary elections (Argentina and Nepal), by 2020 over 80 countries had done so.⁸

In 2019, overall, women won 25.8% of seats in 68 parliamentary chambers up for renewal in 55 countries.⁹ In the 40 chambers that applied quotas – either legislated or voluntarily applied by political parties – women gained, on average, 30.3% of seats. In the remaining 28 chambers, which did not apply any form of quota, only 17.9% of seats were won by women.

Other key factors include policies to promote women's recruitment by political parties, strong women's movements, including women's youth groups, awareness-raising efforts and a more gender-sensitive political culture.

Over the past 25 years, the top countries in terms of women's participation in parliament have become a much more diverse group. In 1995, 8 out of the 10 top-ranking countries were located in Europe (the other two being in Africa and Latin America). In 2020, the group included five countries from the Latin America and the Caribbean region, two European countries, two countries from sub-Saharan Africa and one country from the Northern Africa and Western Asia region (see table 1).

In 2020, only four countries have thus far reached or surpassed the parity line of 50% representation by women in parliament: Rwanda (61.3%), Cuba (53.2%), Bolivia (Plurinational State of) (53.1%) and the United Arab Emirates (50.0%). Women's representation in eight countries followed closely: Mexico (48.2%), Nicaragua (47.3%), Sweden (47.0%), Grenada (46.7%), Andorra (46.4%), South Africa (46.3%), Finland (46.0%) and Costa Rica (45.6%).¹⁰

Table 1: Top 10 countries in terms of women's participation in single and lower houses of parliament: 1995 and 2020 (Percentage)

1995		2020	
Country		Country	
Sweden	40.4	Rwanda	61.3
Norway	39.4	Cuba	53.2
Denmark	33.5	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	53.1
Finland	33.5	United Arab Emirates	50.0
Netherlands	32.7	Mexico	48.2
Seychelles	27.3	Nicaragua	47.3
Austria	26.8	Sweden	47.0
Germany	26.3	Grenada	46.7
Iceland	25.4	Andorra	46.4
Argentina	25.3	South Africa	46.4

Source: IPU, Women in Parliament: 1995-2020.

Few women in politics reach the higher echelons of parliamentary hierarchies, particularly at the top levels as president or speaker of the house. Once elected, women parliamentarians need to hold positions of power and authority and participate in committee work if they are to influence policy direction. They also need to be positive role models for other women, work to change parliamentary procedures and, ultimately, support women's rights and pursue gender equality (see table 2).

Table 2: Countries with a woman presiding over the lower or single house of parliament or upper house or senate by region: as at 1 January 2020

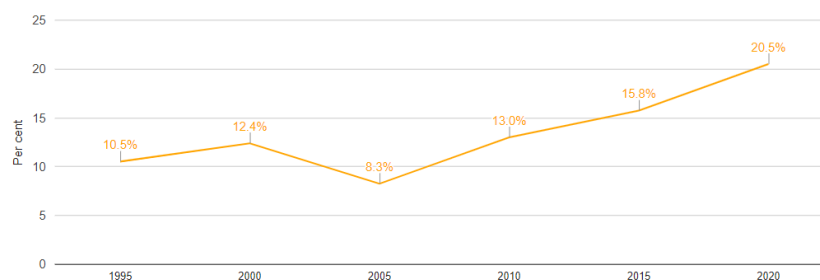
Sub-Saharan Africa		
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Equatorial Guinea	Eswatini
Ethiopia	Gabon	Lesotho
Liberia	Madagascar	Malawi
Mozambique	Republic of the Gambia	Rwanda
South Africa	Suriname	Togo
Uganda	Zimbabwe	
Northern Africa and Western Asia		
Bahrain		
Central and Southern Asia		
Bangladesh	Kazakhstan	Turkmenistan
Uzbekistan		
Eastern and South-Eastern Asia		
Indonesia	Japan	Lao People's Democratic Republic
Viet Nam		
Latin America and the Caribbean		
Antigua and Barbuda	Argentina	Bahamas
Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Trinidad and Tobago (2 chambers)	Uruguay (2 chambers)
Europe and Northern America		
Andorra	Belarus	Belgium
Belize	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Bulgaria
Dominica	Italy	Latvia
Mexico (2 chambers)	Netherlands	Norway
Poland	Republic of Moldova	Russian Federation
Saint Lucia	San Marino	Serbia
Spain (2 chambers)	Switzerland	United States of America

Source: IPU and UN-Women, "Women in Politics: 2020".

Note: Out of a total of 271 parliamentary chambers, two chambers have two additional speakers and three chambers have one additional speaker, for a total of 278 speakers.

Between 1995 and 2020, the percentage of female presiding officers of parliament almost doubled, from 10.5% to 20.5%, although this level of representation is still too low to influence policy-making effectively (figure III).

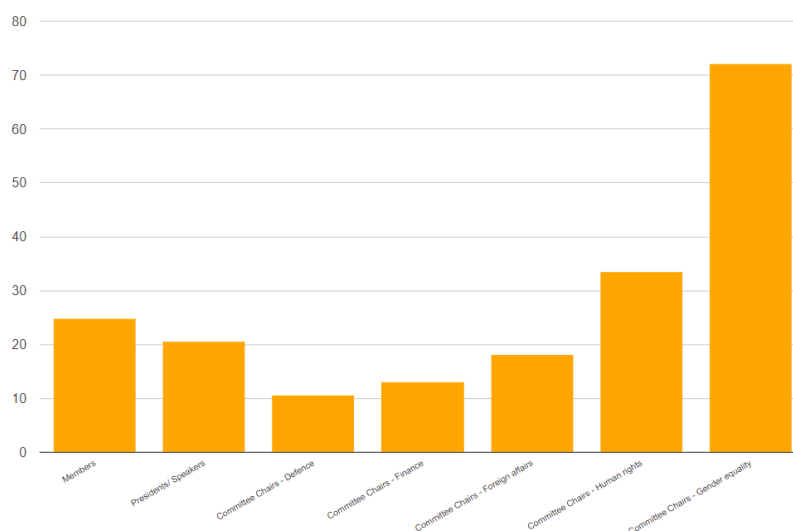
Figure III: Progress in the percentage of women among presiding officers in parliament: 1995 to 2020



Source: IPU data file.

Women are acutely underrepresented in key decision-making positions in parliaments in relation to their overall share of nearly 25% of parliamentary seats. Available data for 2020 shows a contrasting picture of women's leadership of parliamentary committees. Women currently chair 26% of foreign affairs, defence, finance, human rights and gender equality committees combined, but their share varies significantly by committee type, from 73% of gender equality committees to just over 10% of defence committees. Data for the reporting period show that women chair approximately 33% of human rights committees, 20% of foreign affairs committees and 13% of finance committees (see figure IV).

Figure IV: Percentage of women occupying key decision-making positions in parliament: as at 1 January 2020



Source: Compiled and calculated by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Statistics Division, based on data provided by IPU.

Note: Data on members, presidents, speakers and committee chairs cover both upper and lower houses

Legislative environment

Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights recognizes "the right and opportunity, without distinction of any kind such as (♦) sex (♦) to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives".

Article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women provides that "States Parties shall (♦) ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right: (a) To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies; (b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government."

Countries in focus

Over the last 25-year span, from 1995 to 2020, the most significant progress in the achievement of women's equal representation in parliament has been made in Rwanda (+ 57%), the United Arab Emirates (+50%), Andorra (+ 42.8%) and the Plurinational State of Bolivia (+42.3%), respectively, in their lower or single houses. In 1995, the top country (Sweden) had 40% of seats held by women in parliament. In 2020, in the top country (Rwanda), over 60% of seats in the lower house are held by women.

About the data

Coverage

Sustainable Development Goal indicator 5.5.1a covers the single chamber in unicameral parliaments and the lower chamber in bicameral parliaments. It does not cover the upper chamber of bicameral parliaments. Data on the proportion of seats held by women and of female speakers/presiding officers of parliament are available for the period 1995–2020.

Availability

Data on female chairs of parliamentary committees is only available for 2020.

As at 1 January 2020, data on the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women were available for 191 countries; data on female presiding officers were available for 192 countries; and data on female chairs of parliamentary committees in the above five areas were available for 127 countries.

Oceania (excl) refers to Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand throughout the publication.

Definitions

- Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments is calculated as the total number of seats occupied by women divided by the total number of seats in parliament. Seats refer to the number of members of parliament (Sustainable Development Goal indicator 5.5.1a).
- Proportion of women in key decision-making positions in national parliaments, all chambers combined, is calculated as the total number of positions held by women as presiding officers/speakers and chairs of parliamentary committees in the following five areas: foreign affairs, defence, finance, gender equality, and human rights. (Sustainable Development Goal indicator 16.7.1a)

References

- Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2008, Equality in Politics: A Survey of Women and Men in Parliaments ([link](#)).
- IPU, 2010, Is Parliament Open to Women? ([link](#)).
- IPU, 2011, Gender-Sensitive Parliaments. A Global Review of Good Practice ([link](#)).

Sustainable Development Goals metadata

- [Indicator 5.5.1a](#) [Indicator 16.7.1a](#)

Web addresses

- <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking>
- <https://data.ipu.org/women-averages>
- <https://data.ipu.org/speakers>
- <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/database>

Footnotes

1. Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 1997, Universal Declaration on Democracy, article 4.
2. Mary Caprioli, "Gendered Conflict", Journal of Peace Research, vol. 37, Issue. 1 (2000).
3. Astghik Mavisakalyan and Yashar Tarverdi, "Gender and climate change: Do female parliamentarians make difference?", European Journal of Political Economy, vol. 56 (2019).
4. IPU, 2012, Plan of Action for Gender-Sensitive Parliaments.
5. IPU, 2016, Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliament, Issues brief; and IPU, 2019, Guidelines for the elimination of sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliament.
6. IPU and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2018, "Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe", Issues Brief.
7. Gender quotas, which aim to reverse discrimination in law and practice and to level the playing field for women in politics, are numerical targets that stipulate the number or percentage of women that must be included in a candidate list or the number of seats to be allocated to women in a legislature. Gender quotas may be mandated in the constitution, stipulated in national legislation or formulated in a political party statute.
8. IPU, Women in Parliament: 1990–2020–25 years in review.
9. Ibid., data includes parliamentary chambers in both lower and upper houses.
10. IPU and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) 2020, "Women in Politics: 2020".