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Enhancing participation of women from under-represented groups in political and public decision-making

Report¹

Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination

Rapporteur: Ms Eglantina Gjermeni, Albania, Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group

Summary

Women's participation in political and public decision-making has globally increased in Council of Europe member States in past decades. However, they still represent a rather homogeneous group: women from under-represented groups, including young women, women with disabilities, LGBTI women and Roma women are less visible and have less access to leadership positions. They face multiple obstacles to participation, such as discrimination, weight of prejudice, risk of violence, fear of stigmatization, barriers within political parties, societal pressure, unequal sharing of care responsibilities, lack of recognition of their skills and lack of accessibility.

Quotas, training, mentorship programmes, investing in accessibility, measures for the selection of candidates, gender-sensitive policies, the promotion of role models and actions to combat and prevent violence against women in politics can contribute to increasing their participation.

Enhancing the participation of women from under-represented groups in political and public decision-making will have a positive impact in the long-term. It will mean more inclusion and representativeness. It will contribute to reducing real or perceived gaps between decision-makers and the population. It is high time for the European political landscape to reflect better the diversity of European societies and make a stronger commitment to equality.

¹ Reference to Committee: [Doc. 15067](#), Ref. 4503 of 7 May 2020.

A. Draft resolution²

1. In past decades, significant progress has been made with regard to the participation of women in political and public decision-making in Europe. Women have reached high positions of power and several European countries are close to parity in parliaments.
2. This progress has nevertheless been too slow and uneven. In addition, there is still a lack of participation and representation in political and public decision-making of women with disabilities, young women, LGBTI women, Roma women, women of colour, women with an immigration background, women belonging to minorities and indigenous women, rural women and women with a lower socio-economic background.
3. The Assembly is concerned about the numerous obstacles still faced by women, which prevent their active participation in political and public decision-making. These obstacles have been exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular for women from under-represented groups. Weight of prejudice and stereotypes, risk of violence, lack of consideration for their skills and expertise, unequal sharing of care responsibilities, social norms, high levels of discrimination, barriers within political parties, lack of targeted measures and lack of accessibility in general limit participation. Profound structural changes are needed to tackle these challenges and enhance the participation of women from under-represented groups in political and public decision-making at all levels.
4. The IPU-PACE study on Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe, carried out in 2018, demonstrated that violence against women was widespread in the world of politics. Hate speech and online harassment attacking women in politics or public life are hindering women's engagement in politics, in particular from under-represented groups who face disproportionately higher levels of violence and may choose not to participate for fear of being specifically targeted. The Assembly reiterates its determination to combat violence against women in politics, referring to its Resolution 2274 (2019) on "Promoting parliaments free of sexism and sexual harassment" and the "#NotInMyParliament" initiative led by the former President of the Assembly, Liliane Maury-Pasquier. Enhancing political participation is closely linked to preventing and combating violence and no efforts should be spared to this end.
5. The Assembly recalls its Resolution 2222 (2018) on "Promoting diversity and equality in politics". Concrete recommendations to enhance the participation of persons with disabilities were formulated in its Resolution 2155 (2017) on "The political rights of persons with disabilities: a democratic issue". Political systems and structures should be made more open, inclusive and attractive to persons from various backgrounds. An intersectional approach to decision-making as well as targeted measures can contribute to leaving no one behind. The participation of women and girls in all their diversity in political and public decision-making will send a powerful message of recognition of the importance of inclusive societies, increase representativeness and strengthen the legitimacy and relevance of decisions.
6. Enhancing participation of women from under-represented groups in political and public decision-making requires action at several levels. Society at large and political parties need to make space for women's active participation and engagement. The Assembly underlines that men also have an important role to play to this end by combating violence and discrimination against women in politics and speaking out against gender-based stereotypes and sexism. Men can be allies and actively engage in promoting equality and participation of women in leadership. A profound change of both mindsets and political culture are essential to ensure that political and public decision-making will be more inclusive and accessible for persons from various backgrounds.
7. The Assembly welcomes the visibility given at global level in 2021 to the importance of increasing participation of women from under-represented groups in decision-making, including leadership – for instance, women's political participation is the theme chosen for the United Nations 65th Commission on the Status of Women (15-26 March 2021). It also looks forward to the 2021 UN Generation Equality Forum. Supporting the participation of women from under-represented groups in political and public decision-making is an accelerator for sustainable development and peace and contributes to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Addressing the over representation of men and the underrepresentation of women is important for making democracies more legitimate and accountable.
8. In the light of these considerations, the Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States, observers and partners for democracy to:

² Draft resolution adopted unanimously on 15 March 2021.

8.1. With regard to preventing and combating gender-based stereotypes, sexism, discrimination and violence against women:

8.1.1. sign and ratify, if it is not yet the case, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, stepping up implementation in those States which are Parties;

8.1.2. introduce measures to implement Assembly Resolution 2274 (2019) on “Promoting parliaments free of sexism and sexual harassment” and Assembly Resolution 2290 (2019) on “Towards an ambitious Council of Europe agenda for gender equality”;

8.1.3. work towards the implementation of the Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023 and raise awareness of the added value of inclusive political environments;

8.1.4. implement without further delay Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1 on preventing and combating sexism;

8.1.5. ensure that all public institutions apply zero tolerance for violence, discrimination and abuse, including through ratification of the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190);

8.1.6. promote inclusive education with the aim of preventing and combating gender-based stereotypes and sexism from an early age;

8.1.7. repeal discriminatory legislation against all under-represented groups, which hinders their participation in political and public decision-making;

8.1.8. create safe and enabling environments for participation by introducing measures to prevent and combat all forms of discrimination, racist and sexist hate speech and violence against women in politics, and allocate sufficient resources to this end;

8.1.9. encourage the participation of women in the world of politics and the labour market by ensuring the provision of affordable childcare and adopting measures in favour of a better balance between private and professional life;

8.2. with regard to access to political and public decision-making and promoting the participation of women from under-represented groups:

8.2.1. implement Assembly Resolution 2111 (2016) on Assessing the impact of measures to improve women’s political representation and Assembly Resolution 2222 (2018) on “Promoting diversity and equality in politics;

8.2.2. implement Committee of Ministers Recommendation No. R (2003) 3 on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision making;

8.2.3. collect disaggregated data and support research on the participation of women from under-represented groups in political and public decision-making, and analyse the composition of parliaments at national and regional level with an intersectional perspective;

8.2.4. establish - as a temporary measure - binding quotas for the participation of women from under-represented groups, and apply sanctions for non-compliance with these quotas;

8.2.5. introduce legislation and policies to implement Assembly Resolution 2155 (2017) on “The political rights of persons with disabilities: a democratic issue” and make the accessibility of electoral processes, information and procedures a priority;

8.2.6. sign and ratify the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ETS No. 157) and the Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level (ETS No. 144), if this is not yet the case;

8.2.7. work towards the implementation of the Council of Europe Strategic Action Plan for Roma and Traveller Inclusion (2020-2025);

8.2.8. cap the financing of electoral campaigns to enable broader participation and provide equal access to funds;

8.2.9. assess the needs of women from under-represented groups willing to participate in political and public life in order to provide adequate support, including for women experiencing multiple and intersectional discrimination;

8.2.10. set up and fund leadership and mentorship programmes for women from under-represented groups;

8.2.11. promote the creation of women's networks or caucuses in national parliaments, as well as youth-led parliaments;

8.2.12. provide financial support to non-governmental organisations working on the promotion of gender equality, inclusion and the participation of women from under-represented groups in political and public decision-making;

8.2.13. foster and sustain civic space and engagement for women's rights organisations to hold decision makers to account on gender equality concerns;

8.2.14. engage with media to promote role models from under-represented groups and combat gender stereotypes and sexism;

8.2.15. ensure fair, non-stereotypical and equal media coverage of candidates and politicians, irrespective of their gender;

9. The Assembly encourages political parties to:

9.1. actively promote the participation of women from under-represented groups in their internal structures, including at leadership levels, and consider the introduction of voluntary quotas;

9.2. set up rules for the selection of candidates for elections at local, regional and national levels to ensure that gender equality and diversity are actively promoted;

9.3. analyse their internal composition and discuss how to increase participation of women and men from diverse backgrounds and their representation;

9.4. use a gender-sensitive and intersectional approach in supporting candidates for election;

9.5. sign the Council of Europe "Pledge on political representation of Roma and Traveller women" and take concrete steps for its implementation;

9.6. organise training on inclusiveness, intersectionality and gender equality for all their members, irrespective of their gender, and ensure their accessibility;

9.7. organise specific capacity- and confidence-building training in accessible formats for persons from under-represented groups, to enhance their political skills;

9.8. work to increase the visibility of role models from political and public life, including in the media.

B. Explanatory memorandum, by Ms Gjermeni, Rapporteur

1. Introduction

1. The level of women's participation in political and public decision-making is a major indicator of gender equality and of women's empowerment in society. In past decades, throughout the world, women's political participation has been steadily increasing and concrete progress has been made. In the European Union, the proportion of women in parliament is higher than ever. Nevertheless, gender parity is far from being reached in political representation. Seven out of 10 members of parliament in the EU are men.³
2. Quotas have been put in place in some countries to achieve tangible improvements in representation of the under-represented gender. In Spain, the representation of women in parliament reached 44%, exceeding the initial target of 40%.⁴ In Sweden, gender parity has almost been reached (47%) with strong gender equality policies and in the absence of quotas. However, countries approaching gender parity in political representation are still exceptions. There are around 2% of women in cabinets worldwide according to UN Women data.⁵ UN Women estimates that at this rate, gender equality in politics will only be reached in 130 years.⁶
3. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau presented his gender-balanced Cabinet in 2015 by simply stating that the composition made sense "because it is 2015". More and more often, the gender composition of cabinets is analysed and commented in the media. When Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez appointed more women ministers than men to his government in 2018,⁷ he was asked to explain the reasons behind his choices and he replied that he had selected the most competent people.⁸ Political will is essential to make progress.
4. In addition to a lack of gender balance, the current composition of parliaments and governments does not yet reflect the diversity of the population. In 2018, Mr Killian Munyama (Poland, EPP/CD) prepared a report on [Promoting diversity and equality in politics](#) in which he stressed that "[p]romoting higher participation and representation of women, young people, people with an immigration background, persons with disabilities, visible minorities and LGBTI people in politics is a way not only to ensure that institutions are recognised as the mirrors of society, but also to ensure that their concerns are truly taken into account in the political decision-making process". In its Resolution 2222 (2018),⁹ the Parliamentary Assembly stated it was "convinced that promoting greater representativeness of elected institutions would strengthen their democratic character, enhance the quality and legitimacy of their decision-making and increase people's trust in the political system. It would also contribute to preventing and combating discrimination, sending out a powerful message in favour of equality and inclusion".
5. Beyond gender parity issues, the participation of women in political and public decision-making in Europe seems too often, as is the case for their male counterparts, almost reserved to white, middle-aged to senior and highly educated women. Politics, when open to women, does not yet appear to be open to all women. Women and men participating in political and public decision-making often come from privileged groups with access to numerous opportunities from an early age. "Mirroring patterns of male leaders, women who manage to access spaces of power, such as those found in formal political processes, overwhelmingly come from political and economic elites" concluded the expert group preparing CSW 65.¹⁰ Women's participation is closely linked to characteristics such as age, status, origin and level of studies. Double or triple discrimination is one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome. We need to ask the question "which women" are now participating in political and public decision-making and what can be done to encourage more women

³ [Quotas to remedy gender inequality can bring big change in politics and business](#), European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), 1 July 2020.

⁴ [Women in Politics: 2020](#), Inter-parliamentary Union, "The IPU-UN Women map, which presents global rankings for women in executive and government positions as of 1 January 2020".

⁵ Meeting with Julie Ballington, UN Women New York, held virtually on 14 January 2021.

⁶ [We need an equal number of women in politics to achieve real equality](#), Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, *The Independent*, 8 February 2021.

⁷ [Women Outnumber Men in Spain's Historic New Government](#), *Time*, 9 June 2018.

⁸ A new Cabinet was formed in January 2020, with 11 men and 11 women ministers.

⁹ [Assembly Resolution 2222 \(2018\) on Promoting diversity and equality in politics](#).

¹⁰ UN Women, Sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW65, 2021) 'Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls', Virtual Meeting, 5–8 October 2020, Report of the Expert Group. Draft agreed conclusions for CSW 65 are available [here](#).

of different backgrounds to do so. It is therefore high time to look into the issue of the participation of women from under-represented groups in political and public decision-making and discuss measures to increase it.¹¹

2. Aims and scope of the report

6. The [motion for a resolution](#) which is at the origin of this report stresses that the Assembly should provide guidelines on the development of a set of reinforcing instruments to enhance the participation of women from vulnerable groups in public life¹² and all decision-making levels. It also indicates that it should encourage member States to collect data, including disaggregated data, on the participation of women from vulnerable groups in politics and decision-making.

7. The motion for a resolution provides a description of vulnerable groups.¹³ I have decided not to propose an exhaustive definition which could mean overlooking one group or another. The common denominator appears to be that women belonging to vulnerable or under-represented groups encounter more challenges and have fewer opportunities than other women, which can hinder or delay their entry into politics and participation in political and public decision-making.

8. With this report, I have tried to analyse why it is important for women from under-represented groups to participate in political and public decision making and what specific measures can be taken to support their participation. I have looked for good practices which could be promoted, either at local or national level, including by political parties. I have also reviewed the different challenges preventing women from under-represented groups from participating and looked for innovative projects to tackle them. The Committee approved my proposal to replace the word “vulnerable” by “under-represented” in the title of the report.

3. Working methods

9. I carried out desk research based on the concluding observations of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against women and the follow-up to Committee of Ministers Recommendation [CM/Rec\(2003\)3 on Balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision making](#).¹⁴ I have also looked into the information provided by States for the review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, which celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2020,¹⁵ work by UN Women, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).¹⁶

10. I held an inspiring virtual bilateral meeting with Ms Bardina (Ukraine, ALDE), mover of the motion for a resolution. I would also like to thank Ms Lovoshkina (Ukraine, SOC) for her comprehensive written contribution on the situation in Ukraine. I would like to thank as well Ms Serap Yaşar (Turkey, NR) for the written information she provided on the functioning of the AKP political party women's branch.

11. On 3 November 2020, I held a bilateral meeting with Thorsten Afflerbach and Valérie Poppe from the Council of Europe Roma division on the political participation of Roma women. I also held meetings with Alazne Irigoyen, co-founder of the platform Young feminist Europe¹⁷ and researcher at Bilbao University on 18 December 2020 and with Julie Ballington from UN Women New York on 14 January 2021. On 18 and 19 January 2021, I held virtual bilateral meetings with a series of interlocutors in Finland and on 8-10 and 16 February 2021, I held virtual bilateral meetings with interlocutors in the Netherlands.¹⁸ I would like to thank the

¹¹ In its [Resolution 2111 \(2016\) on Assessing the impact of measures to improve women's political representation](#), the Assembly recommended a series of measures but did not address the specific difficulties encountered by women from vulnerable groups.

¹² “Public life can be defined, broadly, as the realm within which formal political processes are embedded, and activities concerned with public and political issues take place. It can include but is not limited to the work of government, media, civil society organizations, networks of activists and other figures in public-facing roles. People's participation within public life can be characterized as formal and informal.” Report of the Expert Group, UN Women, Sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW65, 2021), ‘Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls’, Virtual Meeting, UN Women, 5–8 October 2020, p4, [EGM/2020/REPORT](#), October 2020.

¹³ “These include women and girls with low educational attainment, low-income, unemployed, rural, with disabilities, who are forced to get married or are early married, who belong to ethnic/religious minorities, refugees and internally displaced women and girls, women and girls living with HIV/AIDS and others”, motion for a resolution.

¹⁴ [Third round of monitoring on the implementation of CM Recommendation Rec\(2003\)3 on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making Analytical report - 2016 data](#).

¹⁵ National-level reviews of the progress made and challenges encountered in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Country reports: www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw64-2020/preparations#national-level-reviews

¹⁶ [Compendium of Good Practices for Advancing Women's Political Participation in the OSCE Region](#), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, February 2016.

¹⁷ [Young feminist Europe](#).

¹⁸ List of the meetings held in doc inf ...

chairpersons Kimmo Kiljunen and Petra Stienen as well as the secretariats of these delegations for the support provided. On 11 February 2021, I met with Alja Van Heel, Senior Gender Adviser at the OSCE/ODIHR. On 17 February 2021, I held a virtual bilateral meeting with Momodou Malcolm Jallow, General Rapporteur on combating racism and intolerance.

12. In addition, I have collected several testimonies of LBT women engaged in politics: Faika El-Nagashi, member of the Austrian parliament, and Lilian Haak, who is elected at the municipal council of Appeldorn in the Netherlands. I also had the opportunity to discuss with Cianán Russel representing ILGA Europe.¹⁹

13. The Committee held a hearing on 2 February 2021, with the participation of Zeyna Hilal from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Alia El-Yassir, Regional Director for UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia and Marina Bublik who is a young Roma woman engaged in politics in Ukraine.

14. I was also able to attend consultations held in view of the next session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW65) which will focus on women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.²⁰

15. Last but not least, I had meetings with Bardhylka Kospiri, Deputy Minister of Health and Social Protection in Albania on 6 February 2021, and with Brisilda Taço, Roma Activist, Project Manager at Romano Kham on 9 February 2021 in Tirana, Albania.

16. All these meetings gave me extensive input to a report which I believe is timely and extremely relevant, showing both the progress made and that which is still to accomplish. The many enriching interviews are described in the report, and I have reflected the expert and first-hand experiences from around Europe in the recommendations made for adoption and debate.

4. Obstacles to participation

17. At our hearing on 2 February 2021, Ms El Yassir representing UN Women referred to the report of the UN Secretary General in view of the 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, which stated that “rural women, women with disability, indigenous women, LBIT and women facing racial issues and women of African descent were among the most excluded from public life and faced specific discrimination”. She regretted that women in politics continued to face gender stereotypes and discrimination and that not enough had been done against the multiple forms of discrimination against women.

18. The [Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy 2018-2023](#) stresses that achieving “the full participation of women in public, private and political life requires fundamental changes, policies, measures and targeted actions to remove both societal and structural obstacles”. The obstacles are indeed many and of various forms. Analysing them allows us to tackle them efficiently.

19. Women from under-represented groups face multiple obstacles and barriers to their participation in political and public decision-making. Their access to education and services often is limited. They might be discriminated against because of their gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, colour of skin, social or ethnic origin, age or disability, among others.²¹ This is why CEDAW adopted an intersectional approach and recognized that discrimination may occur on a number of grounds, which then produces a kind of cumulative discrimination. This approach takes into consideration the historical, social and political contexts of discrimination. CEDAW asks States to consider the intersectional forms of discrimination that women may face, since not all women are affected by discrimination in the same way.²² The fight against all forms of discrimination therefore needs to be stepped up so as to bring systemic change. An environment free of discrimination is more conducive to diverse political participation and more likely to ensure representation of all.

¹⁹ These bilateral meetings were also held virtually on 18 and 19 January 2021.

²⁰ CSW 65.

²¹ [CEDAW General Recommendation n. 25](#) recognizes that certain groups of women, in addition to suffering from discrimination directed against them as women, may also suffer from multiple forms of discrimination based on additional grounds such as race, ethnic or religious identity, disability, age, class, caste or other factors. Such discrimination may affect these groups of women primarily, or to a different degree or in different ways than men. States parties may need to take specific temporary special measures to eliminate such multiple forms of discrimination against women and its compounded negative impact on them.

²² United Nations, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), General Recommendation 28 on the *Core Obligations of States Parties under Article 2 of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women*, October 19, 2010, paras. 6-9.

20. Violence against women in politics, in the hemicycle, in the street and on social media can deter any wish to get more engaged. Fear of harassment and violence may discourage potential candidates from running in elections. As shown by the IPU-PACE study on Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe,²³ violence against women is widespread and generalised in the world of politics. Women from under-represented groups can be attacked on various grounds. Hate speech and online harassment attacking women in politics or public life are hindering the engagement of women in politics, in particular women from under-represented groups. Clear and strong actions to tackle hate speech, online harassment and violence against women in politics will undoubtedly contribute positively to enhancing participation of women from under-represented groups in political and public decision-making.

21. Women in general bear a weight of prejudice and social norms from society and their own families, opposing to their entry into politics. They might be expected to take care of their families rather than becoming a public figure, due to the social roles that they are expected to accomplish. As stressed by Ms Yaşar in her contribution, “in rural areas, the participation of women may be more challenging due to lack of approval by members of family”. Women may be under-represented in politics due to perceptions that they are less qualified or do not possess sufficient leadership skills. These stereotypes are linked to women’s traditional roles as caregivers.

22. This social pressure is detrimental to self-confidence, and often results in women limiting their ambitions, believing that they do not have the profile or do not correspond to the “decision-making type”. They might think that they do not have the so-called appropriate socio-economic or educational background. This self-censorship prevents brilliant women from deciding to be more active in politics and public life. Lack of confidence and self-assurance is therefore a major additional barrier. Specific training and coaching are essential to build confidence and to enable women to become familiar with the political environment. At the same time, parliaments at national and regional level should become more gender sensitive, notably with regard to working conditions and mainstream gender in their work.

23. The unequal sharing of household and care responsibilities can prevent women from engaging in politics. Participating in political and public decision-making is time-consuming and family support to the candidate is important for success. Long working hours, the organisation of meetings often in the evening and during the weekend and an absence of measures to ensure compatibility with private life may lead to the decision to postpone entry into politics for some years. These factors might also be a reason for not prolonging after a term of office. More gender friendly policies should be designed to create a better balance between professional and personal life. Good practices addressing the practical barriers faced by women as the primary caregiver can be found in Norway and Sweden. In Norway, the State heavily subsidizes public and private day-care centres to help with the burden of childcare faced by women. In Sweden, nurseries are available to women working in both the public and private sectors and are financed partly by central government grants, partly by tax revenue and partly by parental fees. In Sweden, parents should only have to spend 1% to 3% of the family income on childcare, depending on the number of children they have. In Sweden, since 1991, all children aged 18 months and over, whose parents are working or studying, have access to a place either in an approved day-care centre, registered family day care or a nursery school.

24. Women from under-represented groups also encounter major difficulties in being placed in eligible positions on electoral lists or progressing in their political parties. Political parties remain the gatekeepers for the participation of persons from under-represented groups in politics. They are part of the problem, and must therefore become part of the solution. Including women from various backgrounds on lists is important but putting them on eligible positions makes all the difference. Lack of funding and lack of investments by parties in women candidates are also significant barriers. Running an election campaign requires substantial financial resources. Capping of electoral spending could help to attract candidates with more diverse backgrounds. Political parties should provide support to women from under-represented groups to ensure they have adequate financial resources.

25. Lack of consideration of the skills and expertise of women in general by other politicians or the media have a negative impact on women’s participation in politics and public life. Women are assessed differently from men, whether as potential candidates for leadership or in decision-making positions. They usually face the double bind of needing to demonstrate leadership qualities (typically associated with men), while simultaneously showing the expected characteristics of women (such as being warm and caring). As political candidates or elected representatives, women are always asked about their family status, their children or are commented on for their appearance. Headlines still too often focus on these aspects rather than on professional skills, expertise and contribution. In 2021, it appears very limiting for women still to have to answer this kind of question.

²³ IPU-PACE study on Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe, 2018.

26. Lack of accessibility of procedures, information and structures can prevent women with disabilities from participating in public life and in politics. There are some good practices, but they are not generalised and the participation of women with disabilities is still limited. Their participation and representation in decision-making structures should and must be further promoted.

27. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a considerably negative impact on equality and non-discrimination. In her report on [Upholding human rights in times of crisis and pandemics: gender, equality and non-discrimination](#),²⁴ Ms Petra Stienen (The Netherlands, ALDE) stresses that the COVID-19 pandemic “has affected the functioning of our democracies, and human rights across the spectrum. From an equality and non-discrimination perspective, it has shone a light on the far-reaching, structural inequalities existing in our societies, and it has exacerbated them”. Women from under-represented groups have been disproportionately negatively impacted by the pandemic and as a consequence, engaging in politics could become even more challenging. “The pandemic’s profound political and socioeconomic effects could halt or reverse advances in women’s political inclusion”, according to Caroline Hubbard and Saskia Brechenmacher.²⁵ They both stress that a return to more traditional gender roles, increased precarity, more informal practices in politics and decreased visibility of women in media can lead to further exclusion of women. However, the researchers also note encouraging examples, such as the highest number ever of Black women running for political office in the United States in 2020, which could be directly linked to the COVID-19 pandemic that has affected persons of color disproportionately. It would be very interesting, in my view, to carry out further research to analyse the impact of the pandemic on the participation of women from under-represented groups in political and public decision-making.

28. On a more positive note, and as stressed by Julie Ballington (UN Women), change can happen quickly if there is strong political will. We are indeed witnessing change in the United States with the appointment of a more diverse cabinet under the Biden administration as well as a female Vice-President. The positive experience in several countries of increasing women’s participation at decision-making levels may serve as an excellent model for enhancing the participation of women from under-represented groups in politics and public decision-making bodies. Having more women in politics may change attitudes and contribute to challenging stereotypes.

5. Participation of Roma women in political and public decision-making

29. Roma and Travellers are under-represented in political life at local, national and European levels. Roma women are particularly under-represented in the European political landscape. The political participation of Roma and Traveller women was the main topic of the Council of Europe’s sixth International Roma Women Conference in 2017.²⁶ Its main outcome focused on political parties, essential actors in ensuring the participation of women from various backgrounds in politics, as they draw up the lists for elections and may have a pro-active approach in selecting candidates from diverse backgrounds. Political parties and groups were therefore encouraged to sign the “Pledge on political representation of Roma and Traveller women”,²⁷ stating that they “pledge to promote gender equality and the participation of women from minority groups, in particular Roma and Traveller women, in decision-making bodies and in political representation at the next European, national, regional and local elections”. I find this initiative very inspiring and I am of the opinion that it should be further promoted. It was disappointing to learn that only 13 political parties have signed this pledge so far. With this report, I intend to encourage more political parties to sign it and take measures to implement it.

30. The conference allowed discussion on how empowerment could start once the challenges had been recognised. Essential recommendations were made at this conference. While they are specifically aimed to promote the participation of Roma and Traveller women, they could also be an inspiration for other women’s groups. Combating structural discrimination is a key recommendation and a precondition to participation. Providing training, mentorship, career advice, peer networking and capacity building initiatives for Roma and Traveller women who wish to become involved in politics was another important recommendation.

31. Some participants mentioned facing a dilemma between preserving their cultural identity as Roma and participating in mainstream politics. This is why combating stereotypes and discrimination is so important. A person entering politics should not feel they are leaving behind their identity. We therefore also need more

²⁴ Assembly resolution 2339 (2020) on [Upholding human rights in times of crisis and pandemics: gender, equality and non-discrimination](#) adopted on 13 October 2020.

²⁵ [How the Coronavirus Risks Exacerbating Women’s Political Exclusion](#), Caroline Hubbard and Saskia Brechenmacher, 17 November 2020, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

²⁶ [Sixth International Roma Women Conference, “Women and Political Representation: The Case of Roma and Traveller Women”](#), 6-7 November 2017, Strasbourg.

²⁷ [Pledge on political representation of Roma women](#), Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 6-7 November 2017.

openness from parties and specific measures to promote participation from various backgrounds. The adoption of quotas by political parties could have a significant impact. Training leaders and political parties on gender sensitivity in political party structures and recruitment and selection practices also came up as a relevant recommendation.

32. The Council of Europe Roma and Travellers Division has been organising training sessions to increase their participation in policymaking, as well as their political representation, focused on capacity-building. In my view, such training is a good practice and should be promoted. Training participants are selected on the basis of their plans and motivation and they should be planning to run for elections at local, national or European level. Roma civil society organisations may also suggest names of promising candidate who would be interested in such training. They learn how to run an election campaign, how to speak in public and how to gain citizens' support during the campaign. Follow-up training is also organised on how to hold office once elected, which I find particularly important. After election at national or local level, elected candidates need further training, mentoring and coaching programmes to help them adjust to a new and generally unfriendly environment, and to increase the effectiveness of their political knowledge and skills. From my own personal and professional experience, I consider these training programmes to be extremely important and closely related to women's professional performance. The skill set which requires development includes understanding the formal and informal functioning of politics, fund raising, working with the media, leadership, networking, negotiation, lobbying, leadership and elected official-constituent relations, among others.

33. The selection of trainees is very important so as to ensure diverse participation. This process is open, transparent and inclusive. There may be some obstacles to joining a course, such as reluctance on the part of the family or criticism from peers and friends. Participation is also hindered by multiple inequalities, for instance in access to education or more logistical issues such as remoteness and lack of transportation. It can be difficult for a Roma woman to affirm that she would like to enter politics, participate, be visible and potentially travel and become more independent. Organisers of activities to promote participation need to take these possible obstacles into consideration and undertake a sensitive approach during the selection process. Training sessions are customised to the needs of the women who attend.

34. I read with interest that in 2019, out of 15 Roma women candidates, six were elected as local councillors in the Republic of Moldova. They had all participated in a "Roma women in Politics" training programme organised by the Roma National Center and UN Women. The following obstacles for Roma women's political participation in Moldova were listed by the Roma National Center: discrimination and sexism; gender roles and family responsibilities; bureaucratic procedures limiting the registration of Roma women with low levels of education; a preference of political parties to include male rather than female Roma candidates on their electoral lists; the tendency of political parties to place Roma women in non-electable positions on their electoral lists; a demotivation due to corruption, political manipulation and unstable political situations.²⁸ These obstacles were clearly identified and discussed during the training, which has had a positive outcome.

35. I was pleased to hear that Eileen Flynn made the BBC's 100 Women of 2020 list by making history as the first woman from the Irish Travellers community to sit in the Seanad Éireann, the upper house of the Irish Parliament.

36. I also received information about the three-year project "Romani women Power of Change in the Western Balkans and Turkey", implemented by Roma Active Albania and supported by ERGO, with funding from the European Union, which aims at empowering Roma women to increase their participation in local and national policy and decision-making processes. Part of the project is dedicated to raising awareness of the negative impact of patriarchal power structures on Roma women, and finding ways to engage them in civil society structures and in public life.

37. I had the opportunity to interview Brisilda Taço, who won the "Unknown Heroes" EU Award for Roma Integration in the Western Balkans and Turkey in 2019. She told me that Roma women willing to engage in public life and in politics faced double discrimination, from the Roma community for stepping out of traditional gender roles, and from the population at large. She recommended the promotion of positive role models of women and girls in the media, investing in education by offering scholarships in pre-university and post-university education for young Roma women and girls, encouraging their participation in municipal councils and participation in networks at various levels.

38. Some role models have indeed emerged and may inspire Roma women to participate in political and public life. On 21 October 2020, Zuzana Kumanová was appointed State Secretary of the Ministry of Culture

²⁸ Natalia Duminica, Political participation and representation of Roma women in Moldova. CEDAW Shadow Report, Roma National Center, January 2020.

of the Slovak Republic. She is the first Roma woman to be appointed to such a post in this country.²⁹ Soraya Post from Sweden was a member of the European Parliament from 2014 and 2019. When elected to the Parliament, she said in an interview: “I always put pressure on myself to show that I am as smart as the rest, and I can succeed. Fifteen years ago, I decided that I will never again feel like a second-class citizen. It is important to know your rights, but also to practice them”.³⁰ She was a candidate for the Feminist Initiative, a Swedish feminist political party, which asked her to run when she was chairing the International Roma women Network. Running for elections appeared as a logical step, after years of activism in civil society.³¹ More generally, in order to inspire more women and girls to enter politics and participate in decision-making, it is important to consolidate achievements with regard to women’s participation in decision-making, support positive models and promote the impact of their contribution. At our hearing on 2 February 2021, Marina Bublik shared her experience as a young Roma woman who ran for election in Ukraine and stressed the important role of the Council of Europe’s Roma Political Schools also beyond the training sessions by offering a support network. She found the training provided very beneficial but would like to see more leadership capacity-building for women.

6. Young women are new drivers of change in politics

39. “IPU figures show that only 2.2 per cent of MPs worldwide are under 30, of which women only make up a small proportion”.³² Nevertheless, in recent years, young women politicians have come to the front of the political stage and impressed with their knowledge, charisma and courage. Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez in the United States is one of them and has inspired many young people to be more active in politics. She was particularly active during her first mandate in Congress and explained her action to her followers on social media almost on a daily basis. She took them on her journey to the Congress, which contributed to increasing their interest in the political sphere. She was re-elected in November 2020. The growing use of social media in politics has definitely changed the way election campaigns are run. With Instagram, sharing pictures and holding live discussions with the followers bring candidates closer to their voters and provide more direct interaction.

40. In Finland and in New Zealand, young women have been appointed to the position of prime minister. They were praised for their handling of the first wave of COVID-19 and put forward the need to better balance private and professional lives. Both Sanna Marin and Jacinda Ardern are parents of young children, which they do not consider as an issue preventing them from exercising their functions. Sanna Marin grew up in a rainbow family and became Prime Minister at the age of 34. Her profile is unusual in European politics and attracts a lot of attention. The whole world looked at Finland when the current government was formed. The majority of its members are women and most party leaders are women aged under 40. Their appointment at such a high level of political responsibility sends a powerful message of trust in the capacities of the younger generations.

41. Greta Thunberg has gained popularity throughout the world for her activism against climate change. While she is not member of a political party, she is an environmental activist and has met political leaders throughout the world. She encourages young people to be more vocal in social and political dialogue. She is an inspiration for the younger generations and beyond. She has been praised and attacked in the media and by some political leaders for her action. She has always replied in a witty and non-aggressive way, which is her way of being a role model. I believe that her actions have pushed more young women to get active in politics.

42. First engagements and vocations are often found in movements denouncing climate change or in feminist movements. A lack of trust in politics, considered as a place of too many compromises, make young people hesitate to enter into politics. Professor Irigoyen stressed during our exchange³³ that young women would not systematically participate in political and public decision-making in a traditional way. Less institutionalised structures are more likely to attract young people, and it is understandable that non-inclusive environments with sexist behaviours are not attractive for the younger generations. There is therefore a need to rethink how decision-making spaces are built to ensure they are safe and free spaces for everyone.

43. During our virtual bilateral meeting with Ms Bardina, we discussed the Council of Europe toolkit for local authorities and civil society organisations for the participation of young women and girls from disadvantaged

²⁹ Zuzana Kumanová becomes the first Romani woman ever appointed to high office in Slovakia, 21 October 2020.

³⁰ Roma MEP: We need trust before we can truly belong, Euractiv, 8 October 2014.

³¹ Soraya Post. Eu(rom)éenne, https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2015/01/08/soraya-post-euomeenne_1176411 Anne-Françoise Hivert, Libération, 8 January 2015.

³² Breaking gender barriers for young women parliamentarians, IPU, 20 November 2020, www.ipu.org/news/news-in-brief/2020-11/breaking-gender-barriers-young-women-parliamentarians.

³³ Meeting held virtually on 18 December 2020.

groups in political and public decision-making processes at local level, which was launched in Ukraine in 2020 and can be considered a good practice.³⁴

44. Sweden, which made the promotion of gender equality a priority at national and international level, allocated funding specifically to promote the political participation of girls and young women. Gender equality has been integrated in all aspects of governance and project implementation and has had a tangible impact.³⁵

7. Participation and visibility of LBTI women

45. The situation is very different between Council of Europe member States as regard the participation of LBTI women in political and public decision-making. In some member States, anti-LGBTI legislation makes political engagement complicated, while in others LBTI women have been able to reach positions of power in government.

46. As an example, transgender women are discriminated against as women and because of their gender identity. Mentoring programmes and peer-to-peer support groups may exclude them. Cianán Russell stressed that homophobia and transphobia were socially more accepted today than racism and xenophobia.³⁶ Fear of harassment and violence may discourage LBTI candidates from running in elections. A more consistent representation of LBTI women is needed.

47. The issue of quotas should also be mentioned. Setting a goal that would not be 50/50 but maybe a bit less would give space to non-binary persons. It would be important to ensure that our recommendations prevent future discrimination in this regard.

48. Petra De Sutter, a transgender woman who is a former prominent member of the Assembly and Chair of the Committee on Rules of Procedure, was recently appointed deputy prime minister in Belgium, selected for this position because of her high level of competency. In the Belgian media, press coverage of her appointment presented her past experience and expertise, but in the international press comments about her appointment focused on her gender identity as a transgender woman, and not on her skills and professional experience. Another example is Ana Brnabić, who is the first openly lesbian prime minister of Serbia. There is a strong will for any politician to be known for their expertise, irrespective of gender or political party. LBTI women, as well as any women from under-represented groups, need to be stronger, more skilled and perform better than others in order to reach positions of power.

49. Lilian Haak, a transgender woman from the Netherlands, elected at a municipal council, underlined during our meeting³⁷ that LBTI women had two battles to fight. They had to fight for their status and for the cause they defended. This made participation in public and political decision-making even more challenging for LBTI women. She underlined the importance of having a support network for women starting in politics.

50. Dinah de Riquet-Bons, candidate for the Greens in the Netherlands, stated it was difficult to enter politics as a transwoman. She has a Jewish background and has been the object of antisemitic remarks since she entered politics.

51. I held an inspiring meeting with Tanja von Knorring, a well-known transgender woman who ran for election in Finland in 2019. She warned against the instrumentalisation of persons from under-represented groups in electoral processes and denounced harassment on social media. Challenges faced by most women in politics are exacerbated for women from under-represented groups. In her view, there was not yet enough data on under-represented groups in the European Union and she therefore called for better data collection. There was a need for guidelines in training programmes for enhancing participation of women from underrepresented groups on how courses could be conducted with an intersectional approach.

52. I found particularly interesting the Political Participation Training Series conducted by NDI aimed at providing LGBT activists in the Balkans with the skills to engage with political parties, parliament, and government agencies. These courses also aimed at preparing participants to run for election. They were organised in partnership with the US-based Gay and Lesbian Victory Institute and Labris, a Serbian lesbian human rights organisation.

³⁴ [Participation of young women and girls from disadvantaged groups in political and public decision-making processes at local level, Toolkit for local authorities and civil society organisations](#), Council of Europe, March 2020.

³⁵ [Strengthening political participation of girls and young women](#), Girls Report 2018, Plan International Germany (Plan International Deutschland e.V.), 2018.

³⁶ Meeting held virtually on 18 January 2021.

³⁷ Meeting held virtually on 18 January 2021.

53. Faika El-Nagashi, member of the Austrian Parliament, shared her story with me. Both she and her parents were born abroad. She identifies as a lesbian woman of colour with an immigration background coming from a catholic-Muslim family. It is difficult to separate her different identities, making her more vulnerable to multiple discrimination. Despite all the challenges, her story is a successful one. She stressed the important role in her achievements of communities' support as well as her experience of activism. Mentorship has been crucial in her political career. When meeting with aspiring candidates, she advises them to be resilient which is essential to survive in the political environment which can be hostile. In her view, role models have a major part to play in encouraging women from under-represented groups to engage in politics.

8. Participation of women of colour and of women with an immigration background

54. I would like to note that the accession of Kamala Harris to the position of Vice-President of the United States of America on 20 January 2021 is a historical change. She is the first woman to be appointed to this position, which is already ground-breaking in itself. In addition, she is the daughter of a Jamaican father and Indian mother, which shows younger generations that the path is open. By showing that it is possible, role models pave the way.

55. Nevertheless, women of colour and women with an immigration background engaging in politics regularly receive racist attacks. Kristina Stenman, non-discrimination ombudsperson in Finland, mentioned discrimination against Afro-Finns and hate speech, which is an obstacle to involvement in politics. In her view, it was important to address the gender aspects of racism. Jenni Tuominen from the Monika association underlined that women from under-represented groups were still quite invisible in Finnish politics. Roma and Sámi women are under-represented, for instance. In her view, there was an important level of racial discrimination and hate speech which needed to be addressed so as to increase the participation of women from under-represented groups. The Monika association provides support to women with an immigration background participating in elections, discusses the role of different institutions and prepares the ground for political participation. Its members are optimistic for the future of the participation of women from diverse backgrounds in political and public decision-making.

56. When meeting with representatives of the Finnish Women's Association NYTKIS, we discussed their programme to tackle hate speech and harassment against women during electoral campaigns. They expressed their worry at the rising level of hate speech against women and regretted that the current political landscape was not very diverse, despite the high participation of women.

57. According to Marie-Anne van Reijen the participation of women of colour and of women with an immigration background has increased in past years in the Netherlands. However, it is harder for them to gain access to leadership positions. Amma Asante stressed that the standard was still a white male, which made it even more difficult for women of colour. Having a seat at the table could, according to her, help understanding the system from within.

58. According to Tanja Jadnanansing, councilor for the city of Amsterdam, women from under-represented groups are not seen with their full potential. They have a lot to bring and teach to the rest of the population. The provision of training should not be made in a paternalist way but take into account the possible contribution of each trainee. The use of the term "empowerment" has been criticised. Adopting a humble approach when preparing and proposing activities such as trainings is important.

59. I also had a fascinating conversation with Samira Rafaela, member of the European Parliament. She regretted the lack of women of colour in Dutch politics and said that she was not the norm at the European Parliament. She is sometimes asked if she is the assistant to an MEP. She explained regularly being the target of racist attacks, which are obviously discouraging to women of colour with political ambitions. Women of colour are often told they are not talented enough to participate in decision making, which is discriminatory.

9. Participation of women with disabilities

60. In 2017, the Assembly adopted a ground-breaking resolution on *the political rights of persons with disabilities: a democratic issue*.³⁸ All the recommendations presented in the report need to be further followed up. Concrete action is needed to allow a higher participation of persons with disabilities in political and public decision-making. Accessibility is not yet a reality in most Council of Europe member States and too often, persons with disabilities are asked and expected to work on disability issues only within political parties.

³⁸ Assembly resolution 2155 (2017) on "The political rights of persons with disabilities: a democratic issue".

61. Tarja Filatov, Vice Speaker of the Finnish Parliament, mentioned that political parties were trying to recruit persons with disabilities to stand in the upcoming municipal elections. She underlined the importance of mentorship for candidates.

62. At our hearing, Ms El Yassir shared the story of Elena, a woman with disabilities who recently entered politics in the Republic of Moldova. Elena, at 35 years old, was trying to access a medical centre in her hometown. She could not access it and had to get on her hands and knees to get into the building. She went to the town hall to ask for help. The Mayor handed Elena a bag of cement and some sand and told her that would have to do it herself. She decided to take matters into her hands and to run for the post of local councillor as an independent candidate. She found allies and mentors who helped her. She benefited from training by UN Women. UN Women helped establish the first network of women with disabilities, which now has more than 100 members. A national media campaign helped tackling social norms and negative attitudes towards women with disabilities.

63. Deputy minister Kospiri, during our meeting, stressed that lack of inclusive social strategies or poor implementation of them perpetuated the invisibility of women from under-represented groups, including women with disabilities, in policy making. In her view, stereotypes about the capacities of women with disabilities have to be countered. Engagement with civil society has been crucial in her political parcours. She aimed to make persons with disabilities more visible on the political stage and to give them a voice to express their needs. Access to information, services, justice and inclusive education are essential to this end.

10. Men can be allies in enhancing participation of women from under-represented groups

64. Women do not bear the burden of reaching gender equality alone, it is a common responsibility and can be beneficial to all. In my view, it is essential to involve men from a young age in the promotion of gender equality. They can be potential agents of change. They can recognise that men are over-represented in political instances and call for higher participation of women, including from under-represented groups. The efforts of men engaged in this endeavour should be recognised.

65. I read with interest an e-discussion held on Iknowpolitics on Engaging Male Champions to Support Women's Political Participation. It stressed that gender balance in politics could "only be achieved if men work side by side with women to share the responsibility in breaking harmful cultural norms and practices, as well as the institutional, structural and legal barriers that hinder women's equal and influential political participation".³⁹

66. Power-sharing is a difficult topic to discuss. Accepting rules, as an example within a political party, to ensure equal participation of women and men, leads to higher participation of women. Redistributing power will be difficult without the involvement of men. During our meeting, Mr Jallow highlighted that the over-representation of men in politics and toxic masculinity were closely connected. From an early age, men are seen as decision-makers. He called the under-representation of women a systemic problem which requires systemic change. In a patriarchal society, this change cannot occur without involving men.

67. Men can be allies in the fight for gender equality at home and in the workplace. Sharing of care and household activities as well as by setting equal standards for boys and girls within the family, men play a crucial role in cultivating gender equality. Promoting equitable employment, equal pay for equal work and helping to reach a better balance between professional and private life are measures which can be taken by male or female leaders in workplaces. Men should also be seen as caregivers and need to engage more in the fight against violence against women. From a young age, most men are told to be strong and to conform to a stereotyped vision of strong masculinity, while women and girls are considered more vulnerable. In the Netherlands, the initiative Men engage aims at working with men to change masculine toxic behaviours.

68. At times, women's movements may create opposition to a participation of men in efforts to promote women's participation. Excluding men is, in my view, counterproductive. All men are not opposed to gender equality. Women's movements could also benefit from the higher participation of men, and gender equality can only be achieved if both, women and men contribute towards it.

³⁹ [Engaging male champions to support women's political participation](#), iKnowPolitics, 6 September – 12 October 2017. See also [Consolidated reply of the e-Discussion on Engaging Male Champions to Support Women's Political Participation](#), iKnowPolitics, International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics, December 2017.

69. Gender inequality must be addressed at its roots to trigger fundamental change. School curricula can help to challenge gender stereotypes and learning environments can be gender-sensitive. Media can play an important role as well. Both, education and media can contribute to changing social norms.

11. Concrete measures to enhance participation

70. Enhancing the participation of women from under-represented groups in political and public decision-making requires a wealth of measures and strong political will. Political parties need to acknowledge shortcomings in their representativity and take concrete steps to recruit candidates with diverse profiles, ensuring inclusive participation and representation. Meanwhile the education system should ensure it does include in its curricula information on the contribution of women to history and politics, and sheds light on role models in order to inspire new generations. In order to counter social norms and to promote gender inclusive societies, gender-based stereotypes need to be addressed from an early age. The norm of male-only leadership needs to be questioned.

71. There can be no higher participation of candidates from under-represented groups if no further action is taken to prevent and combat discrimination. Discriminatory legislation against an under-represented group, such as LGBTI people, must be repealed so as to pave the way for participation. Strong anti-discrimination legislation should be implemented, if it is not yet the case.

72. There should also be resolute action to prevent and combat hate speech, sexism and violence against women in politics, which affect their willingness to engage and remain engaged in politics and public decision-making. The recommendations presented in the report of Ms Thorhildur Sunna Ævarsdóttir on Promoting parliaments free of sexism and sexual harassment⁴⁰ are still valid and should be implemented without further delay. Safe and enabling environments will contribute to increase participation of women in political and public decision-making.

73. The collection of disaggregated data on the participation of women from under-represented groups should be promoted, and measures tailored to the results. Parliaments could assess how they integrate different groups of people. More research is needed in the field of inclusive democracies, on intersectionality and its relationship to, and impact on, women's leadership's roles, on the role of men in supporting women's participation and on the socio-economic backgrounds of women in politics. An analysis of the overall political spectrum and the representation and participation of persons from under-represented groups could also be relevant. More research is also needed to determine how to increase women's representation in locally elected bodies and the number of women mayors.

74. Quotas can be a starting point for change. They could be established for young candidates with a gender component. There could also be a requirement that out of the first three women or men on a list, one would be from an under-represented group. Non-binary persons need to be taken into account when we discuss quotas in order to prevent further discrimination. Time-bound targets can help reaching positive results. Effective sanctions for non-compliance with legislative quotas must be applied. Quotas could be a temporary measure to create important change. However, quotas alone are not sufficient to change a system. They need to be accompanied by gender-sensitive and inclusive policies, gender budgeting and relevant legislation. Quotas need to be considered as a minimum and not only as a target.

75. Strategic communication encouraging votes for women can also have a positive impact. In the Netherlands, the initiative "Vote for a woman" created by Devika Partiman in 2017 is very inspiring. It is a call on women and men to vote strategically for a woman who might not be at the top of the list (preferential vote), which has been widely shared on social media. This strategy has helped to elect more than 150 women.

76. Political parties can take specific measures to encourage the participation of women from under-represented groups. Rules for the selection of candidates can ensure that diversity is included. Parties can analyse their composition and the profile of candidates and hold discussions on how to increase participation and representation. The OSCE/ODIHR has created an online tool allowing political parties to do their own gender audit, which includes a question on reaching out to different groups of women.⁴¹ Gender action plans for political parties could be a useful instrument to ensure their accountability on gender equality. Parties also decide on the allocation of resources for electoral campaigns and should use a gender sensitive approach in supporting candidates. Political parties should promote women's candidacies from under-represented groups through the adoption of special training programmes, recruitment and financial incentives. It is also important

⁴⁰ Assembly resolution 2274 (2019) on Promoting parliaments free of sexism and sexual harassment adopted on 9 April 2019.

⁴¹ OSCE/ODIHR gender audit, <http://genderaudit.osce.org>

to ensure that women remain in their positions once they have been elected and that measures are taken to this end.⁴²

77. Making accessibility for all women and girls a priority is another recommendation. The participation of women with disabilities needs to be further supported. Political parties should adapt to the needs of persons with disabilities and be more inclusive.

78. The development of childcare for all, including for women participating in political and public decision-making, can be an incentive. Awareness-raising on shared parental responsibilities could help. Gender friendly family policies should be promoted. Investing in civic education in school and in adult education on gender equality, inclusion and non-discrimination is important to reach a profound change of mindsets towards more equality and an inclusive society. Increasing the economic empowerment of women from underrepresented groups and improving their access to education, health and social services all contribute to their engagement in public and political life.

79. Formal and informal training are important and have a great impact on professional performance. It is important that women receive training before entering in politics, while they are running as candidates and during their time in office. Creative mentoring programmes can play a significant role in enhancing women confidence, knowledge and skills in politics and decision-making. Meetings with successful women leaders, who would share success stories, personal experiences in terms of achieving goals, reconciling work and personal life, how to deal with a non-friendly environment in politics, how to deal with hate speech, could be motivating and encouraging as well. Training on the preparation of election campaigns, running mandates, confidence building, fundraising, agenda-setting, networking, forming of caucuses and alliances, negotiation and leadership, social media and new technologies are useful tools which require adequate financial resources. In order to tailor training to their needs, women from under-represented groups should be asked about their needs, wishes and how they see their contribution to political and public decision-making. I received the information that in Kosovo,⁴³ NDI had redesigned its programmes to support women and youth and provided training using technology for their political activity.⁴⁴

80. Women's parliamentary caucuses act both as supports to women MPs and as mechanisms to influence policy-making. National and local caucuses of women parliamentarians, women's movement members and gender-sensitive men can work together to set common agendas, and work consciously for gender equality and enhancing the engagement of women from under-represented groups in politics and public life. There will be no progress on gender equality without stronger involvement of male MPs. Gender equality training for men can also make a positive contribution and raise awareness of the importance of equality and inclusion. More generally, applying an intersectional gender lens to policy-making should become a reflex, as well as gender budgeting at local and central level.

81. The media also have an important role to play in promoting a culture of gender equality and diversity. Strategic campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes should be organised to provide space for women from all groups in media and make visible their contribution and participation in all areas of life. Positive models should be promoted to ensure more women and girls engage in public life. Women's contribution to politics and policy making should be more visible.

82. In many countries, women's organisations strongly support the participation of women from under-represented groups in political and public decision making at local, regional and national levels. I consider women's movements and organisations as crucial in the struggle for equal participation and representation. They are key to motivating and engaging women in public life and in politics, mobilizing their collective power to demand accountability and change, and for these reasons their experience and expertise could be used to support women from under-represented groups. Governments should prioritize funds to organizations that work for women, especially women from underrepresented groups. In general, partnerships between governments and civil society can contribute to advancing participation. I found it very interesting that in Finland, women's organisations are strong enough to provide programmes and mentorships to enhance women's participation.

83. There should also be official recognition that public institutions, parliaments and political parties hold the responsibility for making democracies more inclusive, as stressed by Alja van Heel.⁴⁵ Women's participation

⁴² [Compendium of Good Practices for Advancing Women's Political Participation in the OSCE Region](#), OSCE/ODIHR, 25 February 2016.

⁴³ All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

⁴⁴ Information provided by Ms Ana Kadovic, Resident Director, NDI/Albania on 17 February 2021.

⁴⁵ Meeting held virtually on 11 February 2021.

at all levels of decision-making should be considered as crucial to improve their representative nature, accountability and quality of democracies, as well as making the policy making agendas more gender sensitive.

12. Conclusions

84. There are numerous barriers to the participation of women from under-represented groups in political and public decision-making. Investing in education and training, as well as more specifically in civic education, can lead to the expression of interest of potential candidates. To be efficient, relevant and serve its noble mission of serving the interests of the population, the world of politics needs to open up more to women from under-represented groups and provide to all citizens the tools to participate effectively in politics and exercise their rights.

85. It is important to have an intersectional approach and to work towards ensuring that the European political landscape starts better reflecting the diversity of European societies. A variety of tools are at our disposal and it is our responsibility to trigger change, at our individual level and within the structures of our political parties. We should make clear that diversity should, however, not be instrumentalised and used as just window-dressing. Women and men from under-represented groups participating in political and public decision-making do not only represent a group, they bring a new vision and their expertise in various fields.

86. Enhancing the participation of women from under-represented groups in political and public decision-making will have an important and positive impact in the long-term. More women from under-represented groups in political and public decision-making means more participation and representativeness. It contributes to increasing trust from the general public in decision makers and to reducing real and/or perceived gaps between decision-makers and the population. It ensures that their needs will be taken into account. It makes the whole democratic system stronger. As stated by the Expert group preparing CSW 65, *“The representation of women in public life is most meaningful when it reflects women in all their diversity and addresses cross-cutting patterns of inequality across different groups of women. Women are diverse in their social locations, values, economic statuses, political ideologies and in their lived experiences. Policymakers, activists and legislators who wish to progress substantive changes to benefit all women are also challenged to recognize that blindness to the specificities of need, and inequalities between and among differentiated groups of women, can cause more harm than good”*.⁴⁶

87. In my view, ensuring the gender-balanced composition of parliaments at central and local level as well as governments is a first step, but inclusiveness should also be taken into account. A broader institutional and structural transformation should be foreseen to ensure that no one is left behind. Women’s voices in political decision-making, in communities, in parliaments, and in peace negotiations should be considered as essential to support and sustain prosperous and peaceful societies.

88. Continued progress as regards women’s participation in politics and public decision-making can only be achieved by ensuring strong accountability mechanisms that support the implementation of international commitments. The lack of the strong accountability mechanisms could become another obstacle for enhancing the participation of women from under-represented groups at all levels of decision making.

89. Women’s equal participation in parliaments at national and local levels is crucial to improving the representative nature, accountability and quality of democracies. Making our democracies more inclusive is essential to strengthen them. Rethinking their structures might be necessary to achieve this. The burden of enhancing participation should not be borne only by women, but society as a whole. Institutions and political parties need to make space for women to engage and commit. It is also the responsibility of men to allow and promote change, and to show themselves as allies for gender equality. Profound structural changes are needed to ensure more participation, equality and inclusiveness in political and public decision making. It is time to take up this challenge and to step up efforts to close the gender gap.

⁴⁶ UN Women, Sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW65, 2021) ‘Women’s full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls’, Virtual Meeting, 5–8 October 2020, Report of the Expert Group.