



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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Women in parliament: 1995–2020

25 years
in review



Women protest in front of the Swiss Parliament during a nationwide women's strike for gender equality on 14 June 2019. Elections later that year saw an unprecedented number of women elected to parliament. © Stefan Wermuth/AFP

A quarter of a century after the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, expectations regarding women's participation in politics have grown in ambition. Achieving a critical mass of 30 per cent of seats held by women is no longer the objective. Shifting the paradigm towards full equality has been the biggest achievement of the past 25 years. With such a bold goal ahead, active steps are needed to accelerate the change that will lead to gender parity in parliaments.

The last 25 years have seen a significant increase in the proportion of women in parliaments around the world. In 1995, just 11.3 per cent of seats held by parliamentarians were held by women. By 2015, this figure had almost doubled to 22.1 per cent. And **although the pace of progress has slowed in the past five years, in 2020, the share of women in national parliaments is close to 25 per cent.**

HIGHLIGHTS

Globally – 25 years

- In the past 25 years, the overall percentage of women in parliaments has more than doubled, reaching 24.9 per cent in 2020, up from 11.3 in 1995. In lower and single houses of parliament, the percentage of seats held by women increased from 11.6 to 24.9 per cent. Upper houses saw the percentage increase from 9.4 to 24.6 per cent.
- In 1995, no parliament had reached gender parity. In 2020, four countries have at least 50 per cent women in their lower or single chambers, and one has over 60 per cent of seats held by women (Rwanda).
- There are countries in all regions except Europe that still have lower or single parliamentary chambers with less than 5 per cent women: three in the Pacific, three in the MENA region, one in the Americas, one in Asia and one in sub-Saharan Africa – nine in total. In 1995, the total was 52 such chambers spanning all regions.
- Over a 25-year span, the largest progress in women's representation has been achieved by Rwanda, the United Arab Emirates, Andorra and Bolivia, with +57, +50, +42.8 and + 42.3 percentage points gained between 1995 and 2020, respectively, in their lower or single houses.

HIGHLIGHTS

Regionally – 25 years

- Highs and lows: The Americas saw the greatest increase in women's participation in parliament, with +18.6 percentage points all chambers combined; Asia recorded the slowest growth rate, having gained only +6.8 points over the past 25 years.
- In 2020, only the Americas have achieved more than 30 per cent women across all houses.
- Although Europe is no longer in the lead as a region, the Nordic countries are the only sub-region to have over 40 per cent women parliamentarians.

2019 elections

- Following parliamentary elections in 2019, the greatest strides in women's participation were made in the United Arab Emirates, Dominica and Uzbekistan.

Lessons learned

- Quotas have been a key determinant of progress in women's political participation. Of the top 20 countries with the largest share of women in parliament in 2020, 16 apply some type of gender quota.
- Other key factors that help accelerate progress include policies to promote women's recruitment by political parties, strong women's movements, awareness-raising efforts and a more gender-sensitive political culture.

The countries that have achieved the greatest progress between 1995 and 2020 in their single and lower houses of parliament are Rwanda (+57 percentage points), United Arab Emirates (+50 points), Andorra (+42.8 points) and Bolivia (+42.3 points).

Similarly impressive increases in women's participation have occurred in upper houses in Bolivia (+43.5 points), Mexico (+37 points), Belgium (+36 points), Antigua and Barbuda (+35 points) and Argentina (also +35 points).

Looking at the regional picture, **the Americas is the only region to have reached the 30 per cent threshold** across all houses combined, recording the biggest increase of all regions between 1995 and 2020 (+18.6 points). Europe, at +16.7 points, has also made significant strides and is only 0.1 percentage point away from being the second region to reach 30 per cent. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Pacific regions, women's participation in parliament has grown by about 13 points. At +6.8 points, Asia has posted the slowest pace of change between 1995 and 2020.

Europe is no longer leading the way on women's participation in parliament. But the Nordic countries is the only subregion to have topped the 40 per cent threshold (43.9 per cent in 2020).

In 1995, 8 of the top 10 lower and single houses of parliament for women's participation were located in Europe, with the remaining 2 being in sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas. In 2020, the top 10 is a far more diverse list, including 2 countries in Europe, 5 in the Americas, 2 in sub-Saharan Africa and, for the first time ever, 1 in the MENA region.

Table 1

Top 10 countries for women's participation in single and lower houses of parliament, 1995–2020

1995		2020	
Country	% women	Country	% women
Sweden	40.4	Rwanda	61.3
Norway	39.4	Cuba	53.2
Denmark	33.5	Bolivia	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

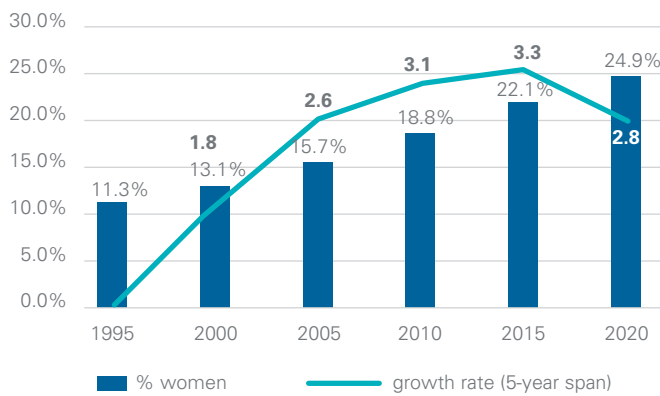
Overall, parliaments are moving in the direction of gender parity. In 2020, women hold 50 per cent or more seats in the lower or single houses of parliament in four countries, including one chamber with over 60 per cent (Rwanda). In 1995, only the top-ranking country (Sweden) had reached 40 per cent.

In 1995, in 109 out of 174 countries for which data is available, women held less than 10 per cent of the seats in the single or lower houses of parliament, and a mere 2.9 per cent of parliaments – all in Europe – had attained 30 per cent or more.

In 2020, in only 24 out of 191 countries did women hold less than 10 per cent of seats in their lower and single houses. And although a majority of countries still have less than 20 per cent of seats held by women, some 28.3 per cent of single or lower houses have at least 30 per cent. More than one in ten countries (12.6 per cent) has 40 per cent or more of seats held by women in parliament, and 2.1 per cent of countries have reached parity.

Figure 1

Women in national parliaments, world average 1995–2020



Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) data for single and lower houses; figures correct as of 1 January each year, except for 1995 (1 July).

Yet all regions except Europe still have at least one single or lower parliamentary chamber with less than 5 per cent of seats held by women: three in the Pacific region, three in the MENA region, one in the Americas, one in Asia and one in sub-Saharan Africa, or nine in total. All three Pacific Island States included in this list currently have no female members. Two of them, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, have previously had women in their parliament. Micronesia has never had a female parliamentarian.

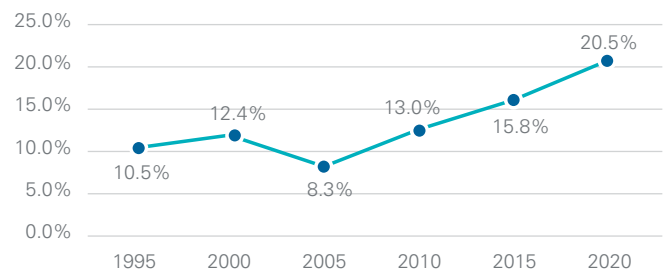
In 2020, the Pacific is the only region to have parliaments without women members. In 1995, 10 countries – spanning all regions except Europe – had no women at all in their single or lower houses of parliament. In 2015, this trend was still observable in the Pacific and MENA regions. Progress in the MENA region has been accelerated by reforms in the Gulf countries, which have lifted legal limitations on women’s participation in politics. As of today, no country legally restricts women’s participation in parliament, although social and economic barriers still obstruct the path to achieving a level playing field with men.

Women in parliamentary leadership roles

Despite further progress in female representation in parliamentary leadership roles, women are still underrepresented among Speakers of parliament.¹ **The share of women presiding officers of parliament has nearly doubled between 1995 and 2020, rising from 10.5 per cent to 20.5 per cent.** Today, women hold 57 out of 278 presiding officer posts in parliaments or parliamentary chambers in 192 countries.

Figure 2

Progress of women Speakers, 1995–2020



Since 2015, parliaments in four regions have appointed their first female Speaker. Asia tops the list with five such appointments: Nepal (2015), Viet Nam (2016), Philippines (2018), and Indonesia and Kazakhstan (both 2019). Four African countries have appointed a female Speaker for the first time in their history: Namibia (2015), and Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi and Togo (2019). In the MENA region, women have secured presiding officer roles for the first time in history in three countries: United Arab Emirates (2015), Syrian Arab Republic (2016) and Bahrain (2018). And in Europe, the General Council of Andorra appointed its first female Speaker in 2019.

Women have now served as parliamentary Speakers in all regions of the world. Only the Pacific region does not currently have a female presiding officer of parliament.

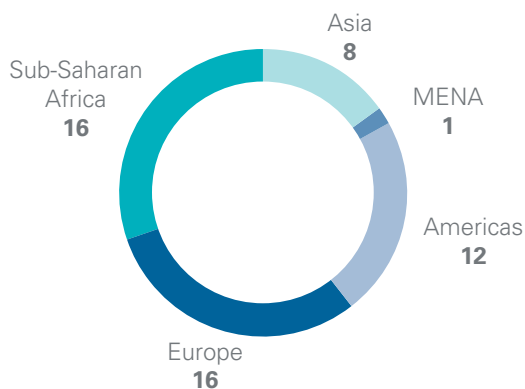


1 In this report, “Speaker of parliament” is synonymous with “presiding officer”.

For the past decade, Rwanda’s Chamber of Deputies has been chaired by a woman. In 2013, it became the first country to have over 60% of parliamentary seats held by women.
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Figure 3

Women speakers per region, 1 January 2020



IPU data from 167 parliamentary chambers paints a contrasting picture of women’s leadership of parliamentary committees.

Women currently chair 26 per cent of foreign affairs, defence, finance, human rights and gender equality committees combined. Yet this share varies significantly by committee type, from 73 per cent of gender equality committees to just over 10 per cent of defence committees. Meanwhile, women chair one-third of human rights committees, one-fifth of foreign affairs committees and 13 per cent of finance committees.

Gender quotas: A key determinant of progress

Before 1995, only two countries – Argentina and Nepal – applied legislated gender quotas. But quotas have spread to all regions of the world in the past 25 years, driving up women’s representation in parliaments in the process. Today, elections in 81 countries are held under legislation that provides for gender quotas, with two countries adopting new legal measures in 2019 alone: a presidential decree mandating gender parity in the United Arab Emirates, and a new constitutional provision in Benin providing for the introduction of quotas in the electoral law. In Guinea, meanwhile, the gender quota for candidate lists was revised in May 2019 upwards from 30 per cent to 50 per cent.

On average, the share of women in parliamentary chambers without quotas is considerably lower. In 2019, women won 25.8 per cent of all seats in parliamentary chambers up for renewal. In the 40 chambers that applied quotas – either legislated or applied voluntarily by political parties – women gained 30.3 per cent of seats on average. In the remaining 28 chambers without quota systems, only 17.9 per cent of seats were won by women.

Table 2

Gender quotas in the top 20 countries by share of women parliamentarians, single or lower houses, 2020

Country	% women	Quota
1. Rwanda	61.3	Yes**
2. Cuba	53.2	No
3. Bolivia	53.1	Yes***
4. United Arab Emirates	50.0	Yes**
5. Mexico	48.2	Yes***
6. Nicaragua	47.3	Yes***
7. Sweden	47.0	Yes*
8. Grenada	46.7	No
9. Andorra	46.4	No
“ South Africa	46.4	Yes*
11. Finland	46.0	No
12. Costa Rica	45.6	Yes**
13. Spain	44.0	Yes***
14. Senegal	43.0	Yes**
15. Namibia	42.7	Yes*
16. Switzerland	41.5	Yes*
17. Norway	41.4	Yes*
18. Mozambique	41.2	Yes*
19. Argentina	40.9	Yes**
20. New Zealand	40.8	Yes*

Yes* Voluntary party quota
 Yes** Legislated quota (reserved seats plus legislated candidate quota)
 Yes*** Legislated and party quotas

Women at the IPU – a long history of participation and influence

Throughout its 130-year history, the IPU has steadily paved the way for women’s participation in politics. By many accounts it has also led the way, for instance by introducing quotas to enhance women’s role in decision-making. Women have played a role in the organization since the 1920s. And since the 1980s, women MPs have had a dedicated structure – the Forum of Women Parliamentarians – to give female representatives a stronger voice in the organization, and quotas have been introduced to enhance women’s role in decision-making.

Women in leadership roles

- Since 1995, two women have been elected as IPU President: the first female President was Ms. Najma Heptulla (India) in 1999, followed by Ms. Gabriela Cuevas (Mexico) in 2017. Ms. Cuevas is also the youngest President in IPU’s history.

- The share of women in the Executive Committee has increased from 30.8 per cent in 1995 to 35.7 per cent today. Quotas for women in the Executive Committee were first introduced in 1987.
- Women have also made strides in IPU's Standing Committees. Twenty-five years ago, women only occupied 2 out of 12 presiding officer positions (both as vice-presidents). In 2020, four out of eight presiding officers are women (one president and three vice-presidents).

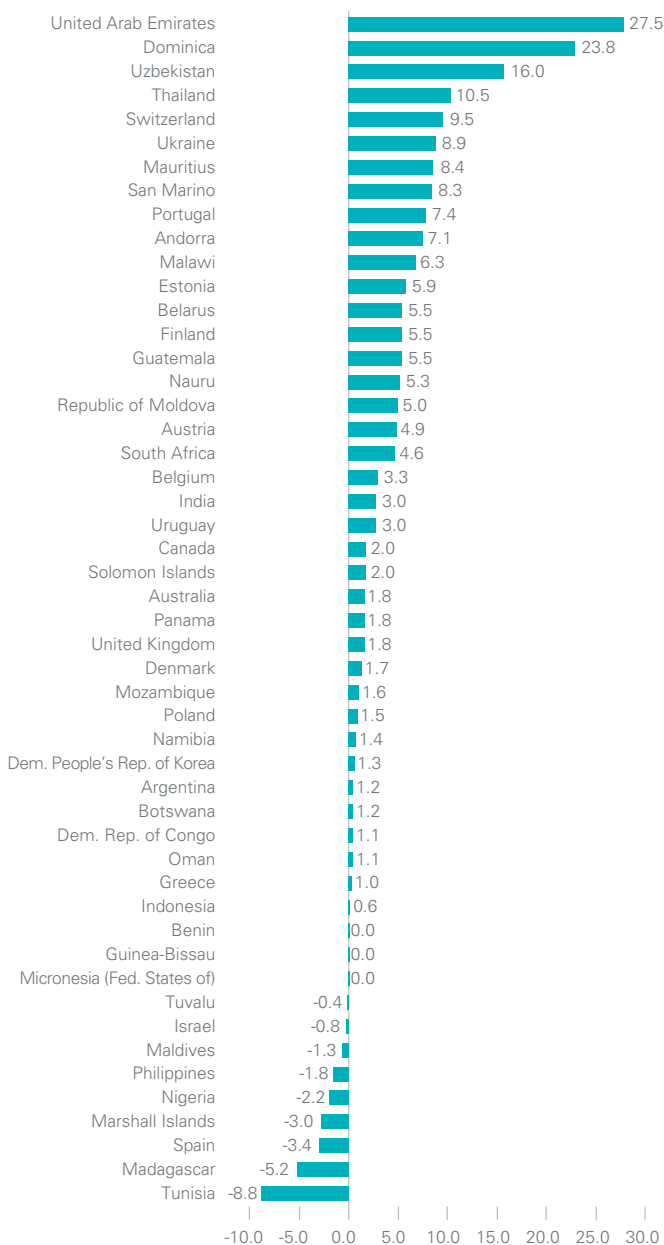
Women delegates

- Over the past 25 years, women's representation at IPU Assemblies has consistently been higher than the share of women in parliaments worldwide. In 1995, 17 per cent of seats were held by women delegates (compared with 11.3 per cent of seats held by parliamentarians). That figure has stabilized at about 30 per cent since 2005.

Figure 4

Parliamentary renewals in 2019

Progress and setbacks (in %) of women in lower or single houses of parliament renewed in 2019:



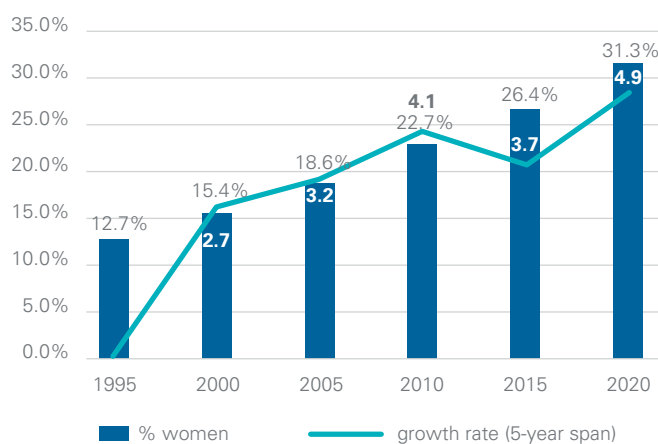
Regional trends

The Americas: Long-standing equality measures yield sustainable results

Over the past 25 years, women's participation in parliament has increased at a faster pace in the Americas than in any other region. In 1995, at the time of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the share of women in parliament was 12.7 per cent, placing the region just behind Asia and Europe. The Americas outpaced all other regions in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and that trend has accelerated in the last five years as women's representation has gained 1 percentage point per year on average. In January 2019, the Americas became the first region to achieve the 30-per-cent threshold.

Figure 5

Women in national parliaments, the Americas, 1995–2020



Today, three of the top five countries with the highest share of women parliamentarians are located in Latin America and the Caribbean (Bolivia, Cuba and Mexico).

Elections held in 2019 confirmed the region's upward trend, with considerable progress and no setbacks.

Dominica saw the region's highest increase in the share of seats held by women parliamentarians (with a gain of 23.8 points), while Uruguay (+5.5 points) and Guatemala (+3 points) also registered considerable gains. In some cases, progress did not exceed 2 points (Argentina +1.2 points, Panama +1.8 points and Canada +2 points).

Dominica recorded one of the highest gains among all parliamentary renewals in 2019 and across all regions. Women won 38.1 per cent of seats in the House of Assembly – a steep rise from 14.3 per cent in 2014, even in the absence of gender quotas. Despite strong traditional perceptions of gender roles in the Caribbean, women have long been engaged in local politics in Dominica, where they account for 40.9 per cent of elected city council members.² The country also has a history of women occupying

2 CEPALSTAT (latest data from 2015). Available at <https://estadisticas.cepal.org/cepalstat/tabulador/ConsultaIntegrada.asp?idIndicador=1708&idioma=i> (accessed on 3 January 2020).



Bolivia was the first country in the Americas to reach gender parity in parliament, including many indigenous women lawmakers.
© Gonzalo Espinoza/AFP

leadership positions. A female Speaker of parliament was in office from 2010 to February 2020, and Dominica had the Caribbean's first female prime minister (between 1980 and 1995). The sharp increase in the share of women parliamentarians following the 2019 elections may also be attributed to the fact that Dominica has a small parliament, and to an increase in the number of women candidates when compared with previous elections (13 in 2019, up from 6 in 2014, despite barely any change in the total number of candidates).

Women's representation in politics in the Americas varies considerably across subregions. The Caribbean has the

Indigenous women in the Americas face "triple discrimination". They are often excluded for being female, indigenous and poor, all at once. There are over 70 million indigenous people living in the Americas and their struggle for political representation, regardless of gender, has been hard. In Bolivia, indigenous women achieved parliamentary representation in 1989 when Remedios Loza was elected to the National Congress. In recent years, the support that indigenous women's movements have provided to the ruling party in Bolivia has translated into increased representation in parliament. In the United States, the first Native American women were not elected to Congress until 2019.

highest percentage of seats held by women in parliament, at 35.8 per cent. Cuba, the subregion's largest parliament, leads the way with 53.2 per cent of seats held by women members, followed by Grenada and Dominica. North America comes next with 36.1 per cent of seats held by women parliamentarians. Here, Mexico tops the list with 48.2 per cent women in the lower house and 49.2 per cent of seats held by women in the upper house. Central America is third, led by Nicaragua (where women make up 47.3 per cent of parliamentarians) and by Costa Rica, although the subregion-wide average remains at 27.7 per cent. South America registers the lowest overall share at 26.4 per cent, although Bolivia has an impressive 53.1 per cent of seats held by women in the lower house and 47.2 per cent in the upper house.

The region has a long track record of applying equality measures, with 16 countries in Latin America having enacted quota laws. These measures have yielded significant gains. For most of these countries, the 30 per cent objective no longer stands. They are creeping towards, and in some cases achieving, parity. Two of the region's leaders – Bolivia and Mexico – are examples of the successful implementation of gender quotas. After introducing quotas in the 1990s, both countries have progressively raised targets towards parity, as well as strengthening mechanisms for implementation. Some gains in women's representation have occurred following the intervention of national courts, which have upheld the newly adopted gender equality mechanisms. In Bolivia, the 2010 law that introduced gender parity and an alternation system would not have been so successful without the systematic rejection of non-compliant party lists.³ These examples show that quotas alone may not be enough to bring about significant change, and that progress also relies on the commitment of political parties combined with ambitious targets and strict enforcement and accountability mechanisms. Likewise, the effectiveness of quotas is also very much dependent on the electoral system. Proportional representation has proven to be an advantage.

Publicly monitored campaign finances also strengthen the implementation of legislated quotas. Data from Brazil and Peru shows that donations to male candidates are, on average, three times higher than to their female counterparts, not least because women are not as well-connected as men to potential sources of campaign funding.

In 1997, Brazil became one of the first countries in the Americas to implement a gender quota system. At the time, women held less than 7 per cent of seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Under the new electoral law, party lists had to include at least 30 per cent candidates of each sex. Yet at the 2018 elections, more than 20 years later, women won barely 15 per cent of seats in Brazil's lower house of parliament. Unregulated campaign funding has skewed the electoral process in favour of men – and against women. The 5-point rise in female representation in the Brazilian Chamber of

³ RT, "Cómo Bolivia se convirtió en el segundo país del mundo con mayor participación de mujeres en política," 2 October 2019. Available at <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/329017-bolivia-ejemplar-camino-paridad-democratica> (accessed on 22 January 2020).

Deputies since the 2014 elections can be attributed to a court ruling on public funding of campaigns, which increased women's success rate.

Although legislated gender quotas have, on balance, yielded positive results in the Americas, 17 countries in the region have no national quota policies. Most of these are located in North and Central America. In Canada and the United States, women's representation in lower houses has increased by 10 percentage points between 1995 and 2020, standing today at 23.4 per cent and 29 per cent respectively. In the **United States**, gender inequality in politics is exacerbated by the majoritarian electoral system, a strong incumbency advantage and gender-specific fundraising. In **Canada**, meanwhile, gender-biased media treatment and the absence of family-friendly and gender-sensitive workplaces have been cited as the main deterrents to women standing for election.⁴ Although these circumstances are not specific to Canada, they are a common feature of public debate around the barriers to women's increased participation in political life. Canada is, however, edging closer to the critical mass of 30 per cent, with a strong civil society push to get more women to run for elected office. The 2019 elections saw a record number of women standing: 42 per cent of candidates were women, up from 33 per cent in 2015. As a result, the share of female parliamentarians is now 2 percentage points higher than previously.⁵

4 Canada, House of Commons, *Elect Her: A Roadmap for Improving the Representation of Women in Canadian Politics: Report of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women* (2019).

5 Equal Voice, "Encouraging data: Number of federal women candidates increased on average 9% across party lines since 2015", 3 October 2019. Available at https://www.equalvoice.ca/encouraging_data_number_of_federal_women_candidates_increased_on_average_9_across_party_lines_since_2015 (accessed on 22 January 2020).

Spain's Congress of Deputies re-elects its woman speaker in December 2019, following general elections in which 40% of seats were won by women. Europe has seen a steady increase over the past 25 years in both the percentage of parliamentary seats held by women and the number of women in leadership positions. © Pierre-Philippe Marcou/AFP

Europe: Sustained progress but losing its leading position

European countries have also registered significant gains in women's presence in national parliaments over the past 25 years. Between 1995 and 2020, the share of female parliamentarians in the region rose from 13.2 per cent to 29.9 per cent (+16.7 points), just 0.1 percentage points short of the 30 per cent threshold.

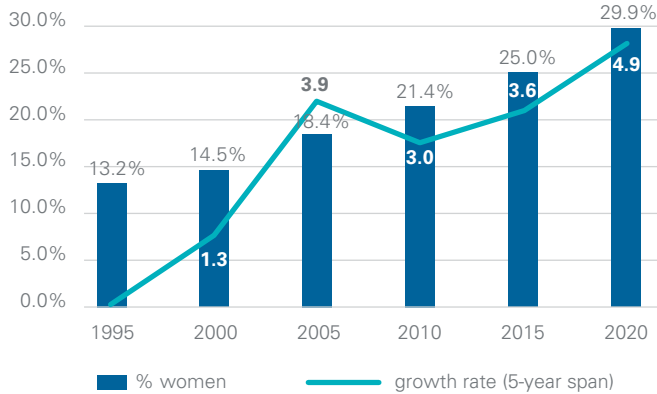
Although Europe has all-but achieved the critical mass, the region has lost its leading position. In 1995, 8 of the top 10 countries by women's representation were in Europe (Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Netherlands, Austria, Germany, Iceland). In 2020, however, only two European countries – Sweden and Andorra – make it onto the list. Progress in Europe is still driven by the Nordic countries (43.9 per cent in 2020). Yet Southern Europe now also surpasses the region-wide average (30.9 per cent of seats held by women), just behind Western Europe (33.4 per cent of seats held by women).

While Europe no longer tops the regional table, a number of countries in the region have registered impressive gains over the past 25 years. Since 1995, the strongest advances in women's representation in lower and single houses have occurred in Andorra (+42.8 points), North Macedonia (+36.7 points), Belarus (+36.2 points), France (+33.1 points), Belgium (+28.7 points), Spain (+28.0 points), Monaco (+27.7 points) and Portugal (+27.0 points). All but two of these countries – Belarus and Monaco – apply legislated quotas. Turning to upper houses, the biggest post-1995 gains in women's representation have been made by Belgium (+35.8 points), France (+27.2 points), Spain (+26.4 points), Italy (+25.5 points) and Germany (+20.0 points).



Figure 6

Women in national parliaments, Europe, 1995–2020



In Switzerland, unlike most European countries, women only gained the right to vote in and stand for national elections relatively recently (in 1971). This makes recent progress all the more impressive: at the 2019 parliamentary elections, women won over 40 per cent of seats in the lower house and now occupy key positions across the political spectrum.

In the last five years, women’s representation in lower or single houses has increased by over 10 percentage points in six European countries: France (39.5 per cent women, +13.3 points), Belarus (40 per cent, +12.8 points), Armenia (23.5 per cent, +12.8 points), Monaco (33.3 per cent, +12.5 points), Montenegro (29.6 per cent, +12.4 points) and Latvia (30 per cent, +12.0 points).

In 2020, women hold 40 per cent or more of seats in the single or lower houses in 10 countries in Europe: Andorra, Belarus, Belgium, Finland, North Macedonia, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. In 1995, only one country (Sweden) surpassed this threshold. By 2015, the number had increased to four (Finland, Iceland, Spain and Sweden).

No European country has achieved parity in parliament. The Nordic countries continue to stand out both regionally and globally for the relatively high share of women in their parliaments: 43.9 per cent. Yet only three of them are close to parity and Iceland saw its share of female parliamentarians fall significantly (-9.5 points) following the most recent elections. Although the Nordic countries do not apply legislated quotas, and have not achieved full parity, they are justifiably considered model societies with a genuine culture of equality gained through long-standing efforts by the women’s movement and a century of women’s participation. Likewise, their outstanding results on women’s representation in parliament can be attributed to initiatives by political parties, coupled with prevailing socioeconomic, institutional and cultural factors.

The European countries with the lowest levels of women’s representation in national parliaments (20 per cent or lower) are Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Georgia, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Malta, Russian Federation and Turkey. Four of these apply no gender quotas whatsoever, while the remainder have basic voluntary party quota systems.

Gender quotas have helped to boost women’s participation in parliament in most Balkan States. Legislated candidate quotas apply in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia. In fact, North Macedonia has one of the highest shares of women in its national parliament in the subregion – and in Europe as a whole. The country serves as a prime example of an effective high-level legislated quota system (40 per cent) with intentional candidate placement on electoral lists (at least one female candidate among the top three positions on the list).

The figures from European parliamentary elections in 2019 reveal gains in women’s representation of at least 5 percentage points across a number of countries: Switzerland (+9.5 points), Ukraine (+8.9 points), San Marino (+8.3 points), Portugal (+7.4 points), Andorra (+7.1 points), Estonia (+5.9 points), Finland (+5.5 points) and Republic of Moldova (+5 points).

Finland stands out in terms of women’s political representation. Women hold 45.6 per cent of seats in parliament. And in December 2019, 34-year-old Social Democrat Sanna Marin became the world’s youngest serving prime minister, heading a coalition with four other parties led by women, all but one of them under age 35. Finland has a long history of women’s political representation. In 1906, before it gained independence, it became the first country in the world to give full political rights to women.

In 2019, a record number of women were elected to the Swiss Parliament (41.5 per cent of seats in the lower house). This leap of 9.5 points was likely influenced by the women’s strike on 14 June 2019 – a strong popular movement coming just months before to the elections, when an estimated half a million women from all walks of life and all age groups took to the streets in cities across the country demanding “higher pay, greater equality and more respect.” This impressive result can also be attributed to the so-called “green wave,” which saw the Swiss Green Party gain a large number of seats, many contested by women.

In the **United Kingdom**, the share of female parliamentarians increased to 33.8 per cent (+2 points) following the December 2019 elections in spite of the challenging political environment. Many women stepped back from politics amid reports of violence, abuse, and even death and rape threats.⁶ Despite this, 34 per cent of candidates standing in 2019 were women (up from 29.5 per cent in 2017), reflecting the effects of civil society campaigns and voluntary party quotas promoting gender parity.

Most European countries use either proportional or mixed electoral systems that combine proportional and majoritarian elements. Around the world, roughly twice as many women are elected to parliament under proportional systems as under majority systems.⁷ Proportional electoral systems,

6 BBC, “Women MPs say abuse forcing them from politics”, 31 October 2019. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-2019-50246969> (accessed on 27 January 2020).

7 Saskia Brechenmacher, *Tackling Women’s Underrepresentation in U.S. Politics: Comparative Perspectives from Europe* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018).

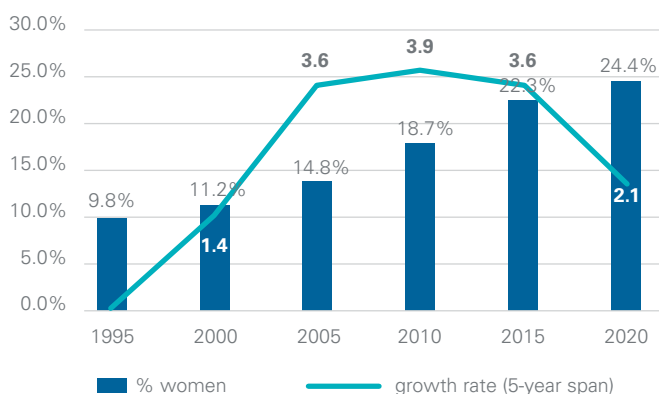
public campaign funding and party-driven candidate selection have all created an enabling environment for women's advancement. Yet gender quotas have proven to be the most effective tool, with most European countries applying either legislated or voluntary party quotas. Public funding for political parties – a model adopted by several European countries – can further incentivize parties to recruit and nominate more female candidates.

Sub-Saharan Africa: Gender quotas igniting a cultural shift

Rwanda has long been the world leader in terms of women's representation in parliament, and it remains the only country to have achieved more than 60 per cent of seats held by women. At the turn of 2020, 24.4 per cent of the region's parliamentarians are women – an impressive 14.6-percentage-point increase since 1995. It is worth noting, however, that the pace of growth has slowed to just 2 points over the past five years.

Figure 7

Women in national parliaments, Sub-Saharan Africa, 1995–2020



Women currently hold over 30 per cent of seats in the lower or single house of parliament in 11 sub-Saharan

African countries. The share exceeds 40 per cent of seats held by women in five of those countries: Rwanda (61.3 per cent), South Africa (46.4 per cent), Senegal (43.0 per cent), Namibia (42.7 per cent) and Mozambique (41.2 per cent).

In the last five years, three countries in the region have seen the share of women in their lower or single houses grow by 10 or more percentage points: Djibouti (26.2 per cent women, +15.8 points), Ethiopia (38.8 per cent, +11 points), and Somalia (24.4 per cent, +10.4 points).

At 26.2 per cent, **Djibouti** has registered one of the region's highest growth rates for women's representation in parliament in the past 25 years. The country elected its first female parliamentarian in 2003 after a law requiring 10 per cent female representation came into effect. Under a new law, enacted in 2018, at least 25 per cent of members of the National Assembly must be women and political parties must have at least 25 per cent of both sexes on their candidate lists. As a result, women accounted for about a quarter of the 112 candidates standing in the 2018 election, and currently hold 17 out of 65 seats in the National Assembly. Following the most recent elections, the Speaker announced plans to create a women's parliamentary caucus, as well as a gender caucus including both male and female parliamentarians. These groups are expected to play a key role in the adoption of new legislation to combat gender-based violence and advance gender equality.

In five sub-Saharan African countries, women account for 10 per cent or less of parliamentarians. The situation is especially concerning in Nigeria, where the share of women in the lower house of parliament fell to 3.4 per cent after the most recent elections (2.2 percentage points lower than in the previous term). In the upper house, 12.3 per cent of candidates were female and women won 7.3 per cent of seats (no change on the previous term). For women in Nigeria, entering politics remains challenging for many reasons, including a lack of funds and education, and poor



A woman leaves the polling station after casting her ballot in April 2016 in Djibouti. The country has witnessed one of the biggest increases in women's representation in parliament in recent years; women now hold 26% of parliamentary seats. © Karim Lebour/AFP

representation in party structures. Yet the current parliament is expected to debate a gender equality bill that should address the current underrepresentation of women in political life.

Overall, progress has been sustained in most sub-Saharan African countries since the 2019 elections. In Namibia, women's representation in the National Assembly (the lower house of parliament) rose to 42.7 per cent – a 1.4-point increase on the previous election and substantially higher than the 18.1 per cent figure recorded in 1995. This progress can be attributed, in part, to the voluntary 50 per cent gender quota adopted by the South-West People's Organization (SWAPO), which includes the so-called "zipper system" for women on electoral lists. Similarly, the African National Congress (ANC) – South Africa's biggest political party – has applied a 50 per cent gender quota for national elections since 2009. As a consequence, the share of women in the lower house of parliament increased from 20 per cent in 1995 to 46.3 per cent at the last election in 2019 (+4.6 points on the previous election).

Rwanda currently leads the way globally on female representation in parliament. In 1995, just 4.3 per cent of seats were held by women. A major shift came with the enactment of the new constitution in 2003, under which at least 30 per cent of parliamentary seats must be reserved for women. By 2008, women held over half of the seats in Rwanda's Parliament, and the 2013 election took the figure close to 64 per cent. The share fell slightly, to 61 per cent, after the 2016 election, but Rwanda can still lay claim to being the only country in the world where female representation tops 60 per cent. In addition, Rwanda's lower house has had a female presiding officer since 2008.

Rwanda's share of women parliamentarians far surpasses the 30 per cent threshold guaranteed in the constitution. The combination of measures – 24 reserved seats for women and a 30 per cent candidate quota on party lists – should guarantee gender parity (40 women out of 80 members). Yet more women tend to get elected on candidate lists than the minimum threshold. Moreover, Rwanda has registered faster growth in women's parliamentary representation than anywhere else in the world since 1995 (+57 percentage points). It is also seen as a place where the socioeconomic and legal status of women has improved over the past 25 years.

Other sub-Saharan African countries holding elections in 2019 saw significant growth in women's representation: Mauritius (20 per cent women, +8.4 points) and Malawi (22.9 per cent, +6.3 points). Both parliaments have recently elected their first female Speakers: Mauritius in 2014 during the previous legislature, and Malawi following the 2019 elections.

Most sub-Saharan African countries that have achieved a high level of women's representation have done so through the use of quotas. Some 18 out of 47 countries in the region use legislated gender quotas, and in 7 of these

countries (including Rwanda, Senegal and South Sudan), quotas are enshrined in the constitution and implemented through electoral law. Nine countries use a combined system of reserved seats for women and gender quotas on candidate lists. Political parties in some African countries have also adopted internal rules on including a certain percentage of women among their parliamentary candidates (for instance in Botswana, Cameroon, Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa).

Generally speaking, countries where women account for less than 15 per cent of parliamentarians do not apply gender quotas. There are, however, some exceptions to this rule. In Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Liberia, enforcement of quotas is undermined by a lack of statutory sanctions for non-compliance. In Mali, meanwhile, the recently adopted quota system is due to be applied at parliamentary elections in 2020 for the first time. Under the new law, party lists that do not comply with the 30 per cent gender quota will be rejected. The Central and West Africa subregions are lagging behind the rest of the region, with women's representation in parliament standing at 20.4 per cent and 14.2 per cent respectively.

It is worth noting that post-conflict transition in sub-Saharan Africa has provided fertile ground for enhancing women's representation through robust and ambitious legislated and voluntary party quotas. Substantial progress has been made in Mozambique, Rwanda and Namibia, and a similar trend has emerged more recently in South Sudan.

Middle East and North Africa: Political change brings more women into politics

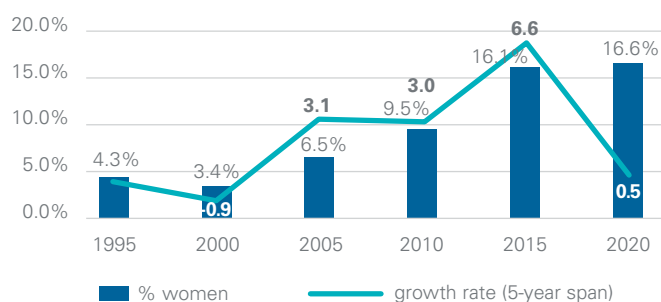
Today, women across the MENA region enjoy the same political rights as men. This has undoubtedly been the biggest achievement of the past 25 years in this part of the world. In 2020, the share of women in parliaments stands at 16.6 per cent – a fourfold increase in representation since 1995. And in 2019, the United Arab Emirates became the region's first country to achieve parity.

For women in the MENA region, acquiring the right to vote in and stand for elections has been a slow process. In the early 2000s, long after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Gulf countries became the last in the region to grant full political rights to women. **Until recently, the region still included parliaments with no women at all.** This situation came to an end in 2017, when the first women were appointed to Qatar's Parliament. Progress in Gulf countries' parliaments has also coincided with their strengthened integration in inter-parliamentary relations. When Saudi Arabia and Qatar joined the IPU, in 2003 and 2006 respectively, they had no female parliamentarians and had not granted women the exact same political rights as men. This issue was raised within the IPU on an ongoing basis. Today, women hold 20 per cent of seats and 9.8 per cent of seats in their respective parliaments. In the case of Saudi Arabia, they have also gained the right to vote in and stand for local elections.

Advances in women’s parliamentary representation in the MENA region in the past decade are closely tied to the Arab Spring, the popular uprisings that occurred across the region in 2011 and 2012. Between 1995 and 2010, the share of women in MENA national parliaments grew at an average rate of 1–3 percentage points every five years. Between 2010 and 2015, however, the growth rate reached 6 percentage points – one of the biggest five-year increases anywhere in the world since 1995, surpassed only by 7.8-point growth in the Pacific region in 1995–2000.

Figure 8

Women in national parliaments, MENA, 1995–2020



Kuwaitis demonstrate for women’s political rights in front of Parliament on the day when legislation was adopted to grant women the right to vote and to stand in elections in 2005. The granting of political rights to all women, on an equal footing with men, across the globe has been one of the greatest achievements of the past 25 years. ©Yasser Al-Zayyat/AFP

Countries throughout the region have enacted legal and constitutional reforms, introducing quota systems to guarantee female representation in parliament. Morocco was the first to embark on this process, in 2002. It was later followed by Iraq (2005), Sudan (2008), Saudi Arabia (2011), Algeria, Jordan, Libya and Mauritania (2012), Egypt and Tunisia (2014), and United Arab Emirates (2019). These reforms have led to unprecedented progress in women’s representation in politics in the region. The five MENA countries that have achieved the greatest gains in terms of women’s parliamentary representation since 1995 (Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates) have all adopted gender quotas, including both legislated candidate quotas and reserved seats (depending on their electoral system).

In some of these countries, increased female representation has led to the adoption of progressive legislation. In 2016, for instance, a new law criminalizing violence against women and sexual harassment came into effect in Algeria. Tunisia followed suit in 2017 by passing its first national law on eliminating all forms of violence against women, including political violence. Yet women across the region still face legal and social barriers that prevent them from fully exercising their political rights. It remains to be seen whether the newly elected parliaments will continue on the path towards a more progressive political agenda. At the latest elections, the share of women elected to both parliaments was lower than in 2016 (-6.5 points in Tunisia, and -5.8 points in Algeria). Despite these setbacks, both countries are still in the top 6 in the MENA region for women’s representation in parliament.

Elections held in the MENA region in 2019 produced mixed results. Tunisia lost the most ground, seeing the share of women parliamentarians decline from 31.3 per cent in 2014 to 24.8 per cent in 2019. The country has a very progressive electoral law (parity with alternating slots for women and men on the electoral lists – the so-called “zipper system”). Yet the number of female candidates fluctuates because parties merely pay a fine for submitting a non-compliant list, but can still register it. In 2019, only 14.5 per cent of candidates were women. The situation in Tunisia is proof that political parties still play the role of gatekeepers, even when they have to pay a price to stay in power.

The United Arab Emirates registered the region’s biggest gains, with a new quota set by presidential decree seeing a rise from 22.5 per cent to 50 per cent of seats held by women. The country had already achieved a first in the Arab world when it elected a female Speaker in 2015. Under the new parity quota system, if the number of elected female candidates falls short of the required level, the remaining seats are filled by appointment. In 2019, when the quota was applied for the first time, 20 seats were reserved for women. Of these, 7 were filled by elected candidates and the remaining 13 by appointees. The policy is part of a broader gender equality strategy that aims to enhance the role of women in wider society.

Recent progress in the MENA region proves that affirmative action can increase women’s representation, but that it takes more to achieve sustainable change.

Campaigns promoting women’s participation in politics can make such mechanisms more effective. In Jordan, for instance, the National Committee for Women’s Affairs ran an awareness campaign on the role of women in political life ahead of the 2016 elections. The campaign, entitled “Because she can ... the country deserves,” failed to meet its primary objective (increasing the number of reserved seats for women to 23), but it made women’s political participation part of the public debate. In 2016, women took 15.4 per cent of seats in Jordan’s House of Representatives – the highest level in the country’s history. And in 2017, the women’s movement scored a notable victory with a successful campaign to repeal an article of Jordan’s penal

code that allowed perpetrators of sexual assault to escape punishment if they married their victim.

In MENA countries with no quota systems, the share of women in parliament remains below 15 per cent. In several of these countries, women hold less than 10 per cent of lower or single house seats: Qatar (9.8 per cent – four women in the appointed Shura Council), Kuwait (6.3 per cent), Lebanon (4.7 per cent), and Oman (2.3 per cent – two women in the lower house, up from one in the previous term, although women occupy 17.4 per cent of seats in the appointed upper house).

In Lebanon, the transitional period following the end of the civil war in the early 1990s has been a missed opportunity for enhancing women's political participation. Despite a remarkable rise in the number of female candidates in 2018 – 86 women stood for office, up from 12 in 2009 – only 6 women currently sit in the 128-member chamber (a slight increase from 4 in 2009). Most of the female candidates run as independents without the support of traditional party structures, which reinforces male dominance in Lebanon's Parliament.

One of the key drivers of female participation in politics in the MENA region is the acknowledgement of women's role in peace processes. As part of the Sudanese transition to democracy, a Transitional Legislative Council will be set up to serve as an interim legislature of Sudan until the elections scheduled for 2022. The Council will have no more than 300 members, of which at least 40 per cent must be women. Meanwhile, the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy has achieved notable success in addressing some of the key barriers to formulating an agenda for peace in the Syrian Arab Republic. The Syrian Women's Advisory Board to the UN Special Envoy to Syria, established in 2016, is the first peace process facilitation initiative of its kind. There is hope that women's involvement in the peace- and state-building processes will pave the way for sustained women's participation in political life in these countries.

As in other parts of the world, **political violence is a fact of life for many women in the MENA region.** In Tunisia, for instance, research into violence against women in

In 2012, 28-year-old Asma al-Marwani was elected as **Algeria's** youngest female parliamentarian. She was re-elected for a second term in 2017. The position of female incumbent is rather new to the Arab political scene and has undoubtedly strengthened the position of women in MENA region politics. Algeria was one of the first countries in the region to adopt ambitious electoral gender quotas. The system introduced in 2012 has substantially increased Algerian women's representation in parliament over the last two terms (32 per cent in 2012–2017, 25.8 per cent since 2017). A women's parliamentary caucus has been created to amplify female voices in parliament. Yet political parties need to play a more active role in promoting women in Algerian politics.

political parties has found that female politicians have faced repercussions for attempting to report incidents of violence, while male perpetrators from party structures had faced none.⁸ Tunisia is the only country in the region to have adopted a specific law against this type of violence. Although this sends a positive signal, effective mechanisms and strong political are required to ensure the law is enforced.

The MENA region is still experiencing an unprecedented advancement of women's rights and political empowerment. The political developments that began in December 2010 have provided new opportunities to strengthen and expand women's rights and their representation in political life. Although the share of women in MENA region parliaments has grown at a slightly reduced pace in the last five years, the institutional mechanisms for gender equality that have been established may secure the much-needed presence of women's voices on the political scene.

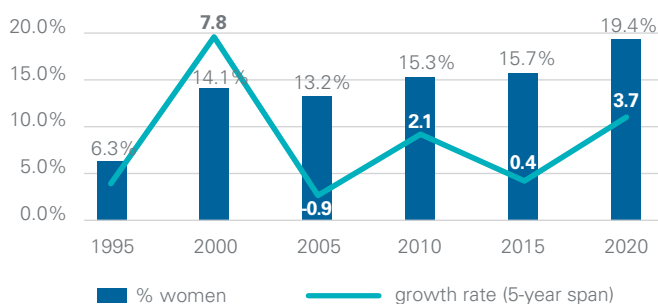
Pacific: Stark contrasts and growing hope for growth

Women's parliamentary representation in the Pacific region has been historically low. Since 2010, the Pacific has come bottom of the global list, behind the MENA region. And despite substantial gains in a number of Pacific countries over the past 25 years, it remains the only region in the world to have a number of parliaments without any women members.

The region-wide average has increased from 6.3 per cent in 1995 to 19.4 per cent in 2020 (+13.1 points), due in large part to gains made in Australia and New Zealand (30.5 and 40.8 per cent women in their respective lower and single house). Without these two countries, the figures stand at 2.3 per cent in 1995 and 6.4 per cent in 2020 (+4.1 points).

Figure 9

Women in national parliaments, Pacific region, 1995–2020



Women were largely absent from Pacific region parliaments in 1995, accounting for less than 10 per cent of the membership of lower and single houses of parliament, with the notable exception of New Zealand (21.2 per cent of seats held by women).

Twenty-five years later, **three countries in the region still have no women in their national parliaments: the Federated**

⁸ Yasmina Chouakri, *Violence Against Women in Political Parties: Analysis of the Situation in Tunisia* (National Democratic Institute, 2019). Available at <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/02-12-2019-Tunisia%20%281%29.pdf> (accessed on 22 January 2020).

States of Micronesia, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. In 1995, by contrast, the Pacific region was home to 4 of the 10 countries worldwide with no women representatives: Kiribati, Micronesia, Palau and Papua New Guinea.

Between 2012 and 2016, Papua New Guinea had two female parliamentarians – the largest representation in the last 25 years, gained through extensive grassroots organizing among women in support of female candidates. In December 2011, the Equality and Participation Bill was brought before parliament in a bid to introduce 22 reserved seats for women. However, the required qualified majority for a constitutional amendment was not reached and the reserved seats for women were not introduced.

In 2020, only 6 out of 14 countries in the region have women holding at least 10 per cent of seats in their lower or single house of parliament: New Zealand (40.8 per cent), Australia (30.5 per cent), Fiji (19.6 per cent), Palau (12.5 per cent), Nauru (10.5 per cent) and Samoa (10 per cent).

On a more positive note, between 2015 and 2020, the Pacific region has recorded one of the world's highest growth rates in representation of women in lower or single houses of parliament, at 3.7 percentage points.

This could indicate that the women's movement is gradually becoming more active, and that traditional perceptions of women's role in society are beginning to change. In the past five years, several countries have experienced relatively fast-paced growth: Palau (+12 points), New Zealand (+9.4 points) and Tuvalu (+7.4 points).

Other Pacific Island States, such as Solomon Islands (+4 points), Samoa (+3.9 points) and Tonga (+3.8 points), have registered smaller increases in the last five years. In Samoa and Solomon Islands, legislated quotas have largely been responsible for this modest growth. In the 2019 elections in the Solomon Islands, 2 women parliamentarians were elected out of a field of 25 female candidates – the highest share of women in parliament since the country gained independence in 1978. Only four women have ever been elected to parliament in the independent Solomon Islands.

In addition to the Solomon Islands, four other countries in the region held parliamentary elections in 2019: Australia, Marshall Islands, Nauru and Tuvalu.

Over the past 25 years, women's representation has grown at a quicker pace in Australia than in any other country in the region. In 1995, women held 8.8 per cent of seats of the House of Representatives (the lower house). As of 2020, that figure stands at 30.4 per cent. The fastest growth rate occurred between 1995 and 2000, when the share of women reached 20 per cent for the first time. The pace has slowed somewhat since then. The 40 per cent voluntary quota adopted by the Australian Labor Party in 2002 has made an important contribution. Most recently, a civil society movement pushed women's representation in the lower chamber above the 30 per cent mark for the first time at the 2019 elections. In the Senate (the upper house), women took 37 seats in 2019 (up from 30), edging the chamber close to parity at 48.7 per cent women.

In Nauru, the share of women in parliament almost doubled at the 2019 elections, from 5.3 per cent to 10.5 per cent – the highest percentage in the last 25 years. Plans to introduce reserved seats for women were debated during the constitutional reform process in 2006, but to no avail. In Tuvalu and Marshall Islands, the 2019 elections saw the number of women in parliament fall, bucking the region-wide upward trend.

In Fiji, women's representation has grown significantly in the past 25 years, from 4.3 per cent in 1995 to 19.6 per cent in 2020 (+15.3 percentage points). At the most recent elections, held in 2018, women were key players as both voters and candidates. The election saw women take a record number of seats in parliament, due in part to an increase in the number of female candidates: 56 women stood in 2018 (23.8 per cent of candidates), up from 44 in 2014 (17.8 per cent). The 2014 appointment of Fiji's first female Speaker was almost certainly an influencing factor. The Speaker was considered a role model and encouraged more women to become engaged in political life. She introduced a mandate to mainstream gender equality in the standing orders of parliament. She also laid the groundwork for the establishment of a women's caucus, which eventually came into being in 2019, bringing together female parliamentarians from across the political spectrum to advance gender equality.

Women face a number of barriers to participation in political life in the Pacific region. Local traditional chiefs are mostly male, and that same tendency extends to national politics. Moreover, the region's dispersed geography makes it all the more difficult for women to campaign, as they often cannot afford extensive travel and bear most family and care-giving responsibilities. The Pacific also has one of the highest levels of gender-based violence against women, which further hampers their full participation in all areas of life.

Asia: Consistently slower growth

Since 1995, the share of women in Asian parliaments as a whole has increased from 13.2 per cent to 20 per cent. At 6.8 percentage points, Asia has recorded the slowest growth rate of any region since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

With a few exceptions, small gains and frequent setbacks have seen Asia lose ground relative to other regions. In 1995, Asia ranked second, tied with Europe. In 2020, it has dropped to fourth out of six regions, having lost momentum as other regions gained it.

As of 2020, only three countries – Timor-Leste (38.5 per cent), Nepal (32.7 per cent) and Uzbekistan (32 per cent) – have surpassed the 30 per cent mark for women's representation. A handful of other countries have exceeded the 25 per cent share of seats held by women in single or lower houses of parliament and come close to the critical mass threshold: Philippines (28 per cent), Lao People's



An elderly Timorese woman shows her inked finger as she casts her vote in parliamentary elections in July 2012, when a record 38.5% of seats were taken by women thanks to an effective quota system. Timor-Leste remains one of the lead Asian countries in terms of women's political participation. © Valentino Dariell de Sousa/AFP

Democratic Republic (27.5 per cent), Kazakhstan (27.1 per cent), Afghanistan (27 per cent) and Viet Nam (26.7 per cent). The share of women in Asian parliaments grew at its fastest rate between 2005 and 2010 (+3.5 points), due largely to the introduction of legal measures to improve women's representation in Nepal (30 per cent reserved seats) and Kyrgyzstan (30 per cent gender quotas). By contrast, the growth rate has been just 1.5 percentage points over the past 10 years.

Figure 10
Women in national parliaments, Asia, 1995–2020



The region's champions, Nepal and Timor-Leste, reached the minimum threshold of 30 per cent due to post-conflict legal reforms. In Nepal, the 1990 Constitution required at least 5 per cent of candidates for elections to the House of Representatives to be women. The interim constitution of 2007 set a binding 33 per cent quota, applicable to all political parties. This was later confirmed in the 2015 Constitution. Since the quota was first applied in 2007, women have consistently held at least 30 per cent of seats. Women have also made strides in political leadership. In 2015, Bidhya Devi Bhandari became Nepal's first ever female president. In the same year, Nepal achieved another first when a woman was elected as Speaker of the Constituent Assembly. Under the 2015 Constitution, the position of Speaker or Deputy Speaker of each chamber of the Federal Parliament must be held by a woman. To date, no woman has been elected Speaker since Nepal's Parliament was established in 2018.

Timor-Leste has adopted some of the world's most progressive legislated quotas for women. Discussions on quotas began during the post-conflict period of 1999–2001, under the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), and they were eventually adopted in 2006.

Since 2007, when the 30 per cent quota was applied for the first time, women have consistently held 27.7 per cent or more of parliamentary seats. In 2011, the electoral law was revised to include a woman in every three slots on candidate lists. The 2012 elections returned a record 38.5 per cent women to parliament, and female candidates took the same share of seats in 2018.

A similar state-building process has yielded impressive gains in Afghanistan. In 2004, the country adopted a new constitution that includes a provision for 27 per cent of seats reserved for women in the lower house. If female candidates do not win enough seats directly, the remaining seats are allocated to women candidates achieving the highest number of votes until the 27 per cent mark is reached. Following the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, Afghanistan came under concerted international pressure to include women in politics. However, genuine acceptance and understanding of the importance of women's political representation will take time. The ongoing threat of violence and the volatile security situation pose additional challenges to advancing democracy and gender equality.

In the past five years, the biggest gains in women's representation among lower and single chambers have come in Uzbekistan (+16 points, 2019), Thailand (+10 points, also 2019) and Bhutan (+8.5 points, 2018).

In Uzbekistan, gender quotas were introduced into electoral law in 2004. The share of women in parliament has increased dramatically as a result. At the 2019 elections, 41 per cent of nominated candidates were women and all parties exceeded the 30 per cent threshold. Women now hold 32 per cent of seats in the lower chamber.

Kazakhstan has no legislated gender quotas. Since the country regained independence in 1991, however, state policy has aimed to provide legislative support to women. Kazakhstan was the first Central Asian country to establish a national entity to promote gender equality (the National Commission on Women, Family and Demographic Policy). Adopted in 2009, the Law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Opportunities for Men and Women governs gender policy. Kazakhstan also adopted a Gender Equality Strategy 2006–2016. It seems that the government's commitment to promoting gender equality may have had a positive impact on women's representation in parliament, which reached 27.1 per cent in 2020 (up from 13.4 per cent in 1995). In 2019, the country elected its first female Senate Speaker.

In 2019, Thailand held its first elections since the 2014 coup d'état. They were also the first elections under the 2017 Constitution which, although lacking gender quota requirements, states that political parties must consider gender equality before nominating candidates for election (Art. 90).

In Bhutan, which last held elections in 2018, the share of female parliamentarians increased from 6.4 per cent to a

record-high 14.9 per cent. By contrast, there were no women in parliament in 1995. Women face a number of barriers to participation: all candidates must have a university education, and civil servants are disqualified from standing for elected office (many university-educated women work as civil servants). In addition, boys have long outnumbered girls in secondary and higher education. The Bhutan Network for Empowering Women (BNEW), a civil society organization, is seeking to address these problems through networking and building women's capacities and leadership so they can participate as equal partners in Bhutan's social, economic and political life.

Four Asian countries (Brunei Darussalam, Iran, Maldives and Sri Lanka) have yet to pass the 10 per cent mark for women's representation in their lower or single houses of parliament. Iran currently has a higher share of women in its parliament than at any point in the last 25 years. In Maldives, where the last election was held in 2019, women now hold a smaller percentage of parliamentary seats than in 1995 (from 5.9 per cent to 4.6 per cent). The highest share, 12 per cent, was recorded between 2005 and 2008. In Sri Lanka, meanwhile, women's representation in parliament remains unchanged from its 1995 level (5.3 per cent). All four of these countries have yet to embrace the idea of increasing women's participation in all areas of life and building momentum for women's political empowerment as part of their political transition.

Lessons learned

The 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is an opportunity to pause and reflect on how far women's parliamentary representation has advanced in the last quarter of a century. In 2020, there is no country where women cannot take part in the electoral process on an equal footing with men. In 1995, a few countries had not granted women the right to vote or stand for elections. In 1995, women held 11.3 per cent of parliamentary seats worldwide. Today, they hold almost 25 per cent. Quotas – either legislated or applied voluntarily by political parties – have been adopted in every region of the globe, and have been instrumental in driving progress in women's political participation.

Quotas pave the way to gender parity

As women's political representation has risen steadily over the past 25 years, so expectations have grown in ambition. Achieving a critical mass of 30 per cent women is no longer the objective. In 2020, quotas are seen merely as a stepping stone to full parity in the future. Right now, women hold 40 per cent or more of parliamentary seats in 24 countries. Three countries – Bolivia, Cuba and United Arab Emirates – have achieved parity in their lower or single houses, while in Rwanda, 60 per cent of parliamentarians are women. The credit for this paradigm shift lies with pioneering countries that began adopting gender equality measures long ago, and today are increasingly ambitious

and persistent in their implementation. Europe and the Americas – regions with the longest history of applying quota mechanisms – are the undisputed leaders in terms of women’s representation. In the Americas, the share of female parliamentarians has already passed the symbolic 30 per cent mark, and Europe is just 0.1 percentage points short of reaching the same milestone.

Experience from various countries shows that quotas work when they are accompanied by ambitious targets and strong implementation mechanisms – and when they are combined with other measures. These include incentives that encourage political parties to recruit and nominate women, policies that level the playing field in access to funding, and civil society and media outreach campaigns that raise awareness about the importance of gender equality in politics.

Political transition builds momentum

In many parts of the world, women have gained political strength in times of political transition and post-conflict contexts – in Namibia, Nepal, Rwanda, South Africa and Timor-Leste, and more recently in South Sudan and the MENA region. By playing their part in liberation movements, peaceful protests and peacebuilding efforts, women have paved a path into politics. Looking to the future, the 40 per cent female quota for Sudan’s Transitional Legislative Council is expected to translate into sustained political engagement for women.

Women suffer some of the worst impacts of war, including gender-based and sexual violence. They are also key players in peaceful conflict resolution and restoring justice in post-conflict areas.⁹ As 2020 marks the 20th anniversary of UN Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, there may be renewed momentum to strengthen women’s role in peacebuilding and political transition processes.

Women’s influence in parliament matters

Gender equality in politics is not only about numbers. The positions that women occupy in parliament are also indicative of their influence in decision-making and ability to set the direction of parliamentary work. Women are still underrepresented in parliamentary leadership roles: 20.5 per cent of Speakers are women, compared with 24.9 per cent of parliamentarians.

Women’s influence is often amplified by women’s parliamentary caucuses. Today, 156 formal or informal women caucuses exist in parliaments. They have proven essential in advancing women’s perspectives and specific needs in parliamentary processes and work environments. Women’s caucuses bring together female parliamentarians across party lines to devise a common agenda; this also

tends to rally male allies. They often work closely with women’s groups to bring the voices of grassroots women to the decision-making table, calling for legal reforms and budget allocations that promote women’s rights and gender equality.

Parliaments must be gender-sensitive

Parliaments, as institutions, have a key role to play in shaping processes and work environments that are conducive to women’s full participation.

Yet gender sensitivity is about more than just ensuring women can fully participate. It is also about guaranteeing that parliamentary outcomes advance gender equality in society. While research shows that women in parliament have promoted the gender equality agenda, this objective must be understood as the responsibility of the institution as a whole – and of men and women alike.

Parliamentary leadership brings about change

Male Speakers have proven to be key allies in enhancing women’s influence in parliament and in shaping more gender-sensitive institutions. In New Zealand, for instance, male Speakers have introduced reforms to cater to the needs of parliamentarians with care-giving responsibilities. In Kenya, meanwhile, parliamentarians can now bring their young children with them when travelling for committee work, and parliament has designated a senior-level gender focal point. And in 2019, male Speakers championed the creation of women’s caucuses in Fiji and Djibouti.

Likewise, female Speakers have undertaken bold reforms to advance gender equality in parliament and served as crucial role models for other women. Their legacy includes setting quotas for women in the leadership of parliamentary committees (Uganda), including gender mainstreaming in the standing orders of parliament (Fiji), and setting up a rural women’s parliament (Namibia).

The way forward

Legislators, governments, political parties and civil society must adopt a holistic approach to gender equality in politics. Shifting the focus from women themselves to the role of institutions and men in opening up access to women, and advancing the gender equality agenda, should help to accelerate progress. The trends below could play a key role in advancing gender equality in politics.

Gender parity as the norm

Gender quotas have been gradually revised upwards towards full parity. The objective now should be for all countries to adopt a legislated quota requiring 50 per cent women’s representation in parliament by 2030. Doing so would mark an important step towards equality in political

⁹ Christina Bache, *Women’s role in peace processes*, (FEMM Committee, European Parliament, 2019). Available at [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL_STU\(2019\)608869](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL_STU(2019)608869).



Women parliamentarians make a statement on unacceptable sexist acts during a special session in the Ukrainian Parliament in Kyiv, May 2019. © Sergii Kharchenko/NurPhoto

life. In 2016, an IPU resolution called on parliaments to set a deadline by which at least 30 per cent of seats should be held by women, and a further deadline by which that proportion should reach 50 per cent.¹⁰ This approach was supported in a recent joint statement by the IPU and the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.¹¹

In order to be effective, quotas should not only set ambitious goals, but also be designed in a way that delivers results, with clear sanctions for non-compliance. Since becoming a candidate is only the first step towards electoral success, additional measures are needed that allow women to be pre-selected into winnable seats or winnable positions on lists (the so-called “zipper system”). Similar provisions could also be set for women in local government and in the executive.

Creating an enabling environment: strong gender-responsive policies and mechanisms

Today, women in many parts of the world are facing a backlash against their hard-won human rights. As this movement undermines implementation of the gender equality principle as a whole, strengthening national mechanisms for gender equality has become an urgent priority. Governments and parliaments must ensure that national strategies incorporate a gender perspective and that gender-responsive legislation, budgets and policies are adopted and implemented. Right now, 2.5 billion women and girls still live in jurisdictions with laws that discriminate against them. Repealing and reforming these laws should be a priority in the years ahead. Likewise, governments should

shape policies that promote equal access to resources – including property, inheritance and social benefits – and make it easier to balance work with the demands of caregiving and household responsibilities. All of this would create an enabling environment for greater women’s representation in political decision-making.

Political parties opening the gate to gender equality

Political parties are often the gatekeepers of women’s political participation.¹² Women in political parties, especially those campaigning for election, face a range of barriers. These include direct and indirect gender-based discrimination in party procedures and practices, a lack of gender sensitivity in candidate selection and outreach, and inequitable distribution of party resources among candidates. Measures such as party quota systems, dual leadership and gender rotation in leadership positions, and the creation of women’s sections within political parties would all help to ensure that parties pursue gender-responsive policies. In order to achieve greater gender balance within their structures, political parties could carry out internal gender equality audits with the support of NGOs and external experts. Likewise, they could arrange special training sessions to develop the skills of women candidates, and appoint experienced female party members, including those in elected office, to mentor women at the beginning of their political careers. Parties could also consider setting up a separate electoral campaigning fund for women candidates, and writing such a fund into their rule books.

Parliamentary environment: building gender sensitivity and zero tolerance towards sexism and violence against women

Parliaments around the world were originally designed as male-dominated bodies. For that reason, they are typically unsuited to the needs of women. That has not necessarily

10 IPU, The freedom of women to participate in political processes fully, safely and without interference: Building partnerships between men and women to achieve this objective. Resolution adopted unanimously by the 135th IPU Assembly (Geneva, 27 October 2016). Available at <http://archive.ipu.org/conf-e/135/item4.pdf>.

11 United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and IPU, Women’s political leadership: Striving for balance: 50/50 by 2030, Joint Statement (Geneva, 8 March 2019). Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24279&LangID=E>.

12 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Handbook on Promoting Women’s Participation in Political Parties (OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Warsaw, 2014).

changed as the number of women in parliament has increased. Women still bear much of the responsibility for family and household duties. The prospect of parliamentary debates lasting into the evening and the early hours may deter them from entering politics. Moreover, parliamentary infrastructure is not adapted to women, especially those who are breastfeeding infants or caring for young children. Parliaments can take a number of steps to reform male-centric work practices and structures and shape a more family-friendly and gender-sensitive work environment. The IPU provides support to national parliaments wishing to conduct a gender sensitivity assessment. Parliaments can refer to the 2012 *IPU Plan of Action for Gender-sensitive Parliaments* and the associated self-assessment methodology for guidance on this matter. Several parliaments have already taken steps in this regard. Recently, in the United Kingdom, a 2018 self-assessment exercise prompted the House of Commons to introduce proxy voting for parliamentarians on parental leave.

Violence in politics has been central to debates around women's participation in political processes for many years. According to IPU data from the 2016 Issues Brief, *Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians*, 44.4 per cent of surveyed female parliamentarians said they had received threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction during their term of office. Violence and harmful norms can silence women's voice, block their representation

and hinder their full participation, even when formal institutions and laws guarantee equality. Violence has a dissuasive effect and undermines efforts to recruit women as candidates. In order to tackle this phenomenon, an increasing number of countries have adopted laws and policies to eliminate all forms of violence against women in politics. Mexico is the most recent example. Parliaments and political parties should adopt policies to combat sexual harassment, including effective complaint mechanisms and penalties for offenders. Female and male politicians must unite their efforts to shape and promoting an institutional culture that offers a safe and secure working environment for all. In 2019, the IPU published guidelines for parliaments on how to address this scourge.¹³

Mainstream and social media: threat or opportunity?

Research into the media coverage of female candidates and politicians shows that under- and misrepresentation of women in the media adversely affects women's aspirations and electoral success.¹⁴ National parliaments

¹³ IPU, *Guidelines for the elimination of sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliament* (2019). Available at <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reference/2019-11/guidelines-elimination-sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-in-parliament>.

¹⁴ Amanda Haraldsson and Lena Wängnerud, "The effect of media sexism on women's political ambition: evidence from a worldwide study," *Feminist Media Studies*, Volume 19: 2019, Issue 4. Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14680777.2018.1468797>.

A woman holds a sign reading "We march today for the planet! Neither women nor Earth are a territory to conquer!" at a climate strike in Quito, Ecuador, in September 2019, amid a global movement led mainly by young women. © Rodrigo Buendia/AFP



can push back against this trend by enacting legislation that encourages positive treatment of women in the media and promotes gender equality in the public sphere. Parliaments could also initiate educational media campaigns that combat gender stereotypes, as well as introducing a rule that requires political parties to ensure gender parity in electoral broadcasts.

At a time of gender bias in mainstream media, social media could level the playing field for women's electoral success. Social media campaigns are considerably cheaper than conventional campaigning, and allow candidates to talk directly to the public. Yet social media also exposes women candidates and politicians to new forms of violence. A strong regulatory and legal framework that requires social media platforms to track and combat online abuse against women is therefore necessary. Sexist speech should be treated as a form of hate speech, including when it happens online. Sexist speech undermines women's participation in politics and, ultimately, democracy. Likewise, female candidates who receive training on safe social media use are both more likely to achieve electoral success and less likely to be exposed to these risks.

New political stakes, a new generation of women?

As politicians and the general public feel the effects of the pressing climate crisis, female parliamentarians have a special role to play. With research showing that women's representation in national parliaments leads countries to adopt more stringent climate policies,¹⁵ there may be new space for women to be game changers. The climate emergency could prove to be a motivation for new generations of women to engage in politics.

Young women are the least represented of all age and gender groups in national parliaments, and the share of young parliamentarians is rising faster among men than women. Women under age 40 only hold 5 per cent of parliamentary seats.¹⁶ Parliaments and political parties can play a key role in supporting young women's political participation, for instance through specific empowerment programmes, or by enabling young women to access leadership positions and providing training and mentoring opportunities. The introduction of youth quotas, accompanied by a provision for gender parity, would go a long way to improving the age/gender balance in politics.

In the wake of the #MeToo movement, and in response to the push-back against many hard-won women's rights, successfully mobilizing young generations of women could have a transformative impact on female participation in politics, thereby safeguarding existing rights and achieving

new ones. Alliances, including men and boys pursuing a feminist agenda, are vital for achieving progress. But these movements will only alter the political landscape if they are supported and adequately resourced.

Growing demand for a new kind of politics should also open up opportunities for young people, and those from more diverse backgrounds – men and women alike – to enter political life. Governments can only pursue policies that advance equality and social justice if an equal voice is given to those who have long been left behind. Gender parity and diversity in representation – including age and ethnic diversity – means better decision-making and has great potential to strengthen trust in democracy and institutions.

15 Astghik Mavisakalyan and Yashar Tarverdi, "Gender and climate change: Do female parliamentarians make difference?," *European Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 56 (January 2019). Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0176268017304500>.

16 IPU, *Youth participation in national parliaments: 2018*. Available at <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2018-12/youth-participation-in-national-parliaments-2018>.

Annex

Women in single and lower houses of parliament, 1995 vs. 2020*

Country	% of women in 1995	% of women in 2020	% point change
1 Rwanda	4.3	61.3	57.0
2 United Arab Emirates	0.0	50.0	50.0
3 Andorra	3.6	46.4	42.8
4 Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	10.8	53.1	42.3
5 Ethiopia	2.0	38.8	36.8
6 North Macedonia	3.3	40.0	36.7
7 Belarus	3.8	40.0	36.2
8 Ecuador	4.5	39.4	34.9
9 Mexico	14.2	48.2	34.0
10 France	6.4	39.5	33.1
11 Costa Rica	14.0	45.6	31.6
12 Senegal	11.7	43.0	31.3
13 Nicaragua	16.3	47.3	31.0
14 Cuba	22.8	53.2	30.4
15 Belgium	12.0	40.7	28.7
" Dominica	9.4	38.1	28.7
17 Spain	16.0	44.0	28.0
18 Monaco	5.6	33.3	27.7
19 Portugal	13.0	40.0	27.0
20 Grenada	20.0	46.7	26.7
21 Djibouti	0.0	26.2	26.2
22 Uzbekistan	6.0	32.0	26.0
23 United Republic of Tanzania	11.2	36.9	25.7
24 Suriname	5.9	31.4	25.5
25 United Kingdom	9.2	33.9	24.7
26 Namibia	18.1	42.7	24.6
27 Burundi	12.3	36.4	24.1
28 Albania	5.7	29.5	23.8
29 El Salvador	10.7	33.3	22.6
30 Australia	8.8	30.5	21.7
31 South Africa	25.0	46.4	21.4
32 Italy	15.1	35.7	20.6
33 Angola	9.5	30.0	20.5
" Switzerland	21.0	41.5	20.5
35 Mauritania	0.0	20.3	20.3
" Singapore	3.7	24.0	20.3
37 Peru	10.0	30.0	20.0
" Republic of Moldova	4.8	24.8	20.0
" San Marino	11.7	31.7	20.0
40 Morocco	0.6	20.5	19.9
" Trinidad and Tobago	11.1	31.0	19.9

Country	% of women in 1995	% of women in 2020	% point change
42 New Zealand	21.2	40.8	19.6
43 Philippines	8.8	28.0	19.2
44 Algeria	6.7	25.8	19.1
45 Cameroon	12.2	31.1	18.9
46 Kenya	3.0	21.8	18.8
47 Lesotho	4.6	23.3	18.7
48 Pakistan	1.8	20.2	18.4
49 Tunisia	6.7	24.9	18.2
50 Lao People's Democratic Republic	9.4	27.5	18.1
51 Romania	4.1	21.9	17.8
52 Togo	1.2	18.7	17.5
53 Malawi	5.6	22.9	17.3
54 Armenia	6.3	23.5	17.2
" Zimbabwe	14.7	31.9	17.2
56 Lithuania	7.1	24.1	17.0
" Ukraine	3.8	20.8	17.0
58 Bosnia and Herzegovina	4.5	21.4	16.9
59 Saint Lucia	0.0	16.7	16.7
60 Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)	5.9	22.2	16.3
61 Dominican Republic	11.7	27.9	16.2
" Tajikistan	2.8	19.0	16.2
63 Mozambique	25.2	41.2	16.0
64 Estonia	12.9	28.7	15.8
" Guinea	7.0	22.8	15.8
66 Poland	13.0	28.7	15.7
67 Argentina	25.3	40.9	15.6
" Iraq	10.8	26.4	15.6
69 Fiji	4.3	19.6	15.3
" Republic of Korea	2.0	17.3	15.3
71 Chile	7.5	22.6	15.1
72 Latvia	15.0	30.0	15.0
73 Bhutan	0.0	14.9	14.9
" Turkey	2.4	17.3	14.9
75 Guyana	20.0	34.8	14.8
76 Greece	6.0	20.7	14.7
77 Kyrgyzstan	4.8	19.2	14.4
78 Cambodia	5.8	20.0	14.2
" Cyprus	5.4	19.6	14.2
" Panama	8.3	22.5	14.2
81 Honduras	7.0	21.1	14.1
" Israel	9.2	23.3	14.1
" Jordan	1.3	15.4	14.1
" Uruguay	7.1	21.2	14.1
85 Cabo Verde	11.1	25.0	13.9
86 Paraguay	2.5	16.3	13.8

Country	% of women in 1995	% of women in 2020	% point change
87 Kazakhstan	13.4	27.1	13.7
88 Equatorial Guinea	7.5	21.0	13.5
89 Bulgaria	13.3	26.7	13.4
" Mongolia	3.9	17.3	13.4
" Niger	3.6	17.0	13.4
" Slovenia	14.4	27.8	13.4
93 Iceland	25.4	38.1	12.7
94 Austria	26.8	39.3	12.5
" Czech Republic	10.0	22.5	12.5
" Finland	33.5	46.0	12.5
" Palau	0.0	12.5	12.5
" United States of America	10.9	23.4	12.5
99 Mauritius	7.6	20.0	12.4
100 Madagascar	3.6	15.9	12.3
101 Malta	1.5	13.4	11.9
102 Croatia	7.9	19.2	11.3
103 Canada	18.0	29.0	11.0
104 Bangladesh	10.3	20.9	10.6
105 Thailand	6.1	16.2	10.1
" Zambia	6.7	16.8	10.1
107 Luxembourg	20.0	30.0	10.0
108 Congo	1.6	11.3	9.7
109 Barbados	10.7	20.0	9.3
110 Gabon	5.9	14.8	8.9
" Ireland	12.0	20.9	8.9
112 Viet Nam	18.5	26.7	8.2
113 Indonesia	12.2	20.3	8.1
114 Burkina Faso	5.6	13.4	7.8
" Democratic Republic of the Congo	5.0	12.8	7.8
116 Brazil	7.0	14.6	7.6
117 Colombia	10.8	18.3	7.5
118 Sao Tome and Principe	7.3	14.6	7.3
119 Georgia	6.9	14.1	7.2
" India	7.2	14.4	7.2
" Japan	2.7	9.9	7.2
" Mali	2.3	9.5	7.2
123 Turkmenistan	18.0	25.0	7.0
124 Saint Kitts and Nevis	13.3	20.0	6.7
125 Liberia	5.7	12.3	6.6
" Malaysia	7.8	14.4	6.6
" Sweden	40.4	47.0	6.6
128 Eswatini	3.1	9.6	6.5
" Guatemala	12.5	19.0	6.5
" Kiribati	0.0	6.5	6.5
131 Kuwait	0.0	6.3	6.3

Country	% of women in 1995	% of women in 2020	% point change
132 Denmark	33.5	39.7	6.2
133 Belize	3.4	9.4	6.0
" Slovakia	14.7	20.7	6.0
135 Antigua and Barbuda	5.3	11.1	5.8
" Jamaica	11.7	17.5	5.8
137 Samoa	4.3	10.0	5.7
138 Ghana	8.0	13.1	5.1
139 Germany	26.3	31.2	4.9
" Nauru	5.6	10.5	4.9
141 Azerbaijan	12.1	16.8	4.7
142 Bahamas	8.2	12.8	4.6
143 Tonga	3.3	7.4	4.1
144 Cote d'Ivoire	8.0	12.0	4.0
" Liechtenstein	8.0	12.0	4.0
" Solomon Islands	2.1	6.1	4.0
147 China	21.0	24.9	3.9
148 Comoros	2.4	6.1	3.7
" Guinea-Bissau	10.0	13.7	3.7
150 Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	9.5	13.0	3.5
151 Marshall Islands	3.0	6.1	3.1
152 Syrian Arab Republic	9.6	12.4	2.8
153 Iran (Islamic Republic of)	3.4	5.9	2.5
154 Lebanon	2.3	4.7	2.4
" Russian Federation	13.4	15.8	2.4
156 Norway	39.4	41.4	2.0
157 Benin	6.0	7.2	1.2
158 Botswana	10.0	10.8	0.8
" Gambia (The)	7.8	8.6	0.8
160 Hungary	11.4	12.1	0.7
161 Netherlands	32.7	33.3	0.6
162 Micronesia (Federated States of)	0.0	0.0	0.0
" Papua New Guinea	0.0	0.0	0.0
" Sri Lanka	5.3	5.3	0.0
165 Yemen	0.7	0.3	-0.4
166 Chad	16.4	15.4	-1.0
167 Haiti	3.8	2.5	-1.3
168 Tuvalu	7.7	6.3	-1.4
169 Maldives	6.3	4.6	-1.7
170 Vanuatu	2.2	0.0	-2.2
171 Democratic People's Republic of Korea	20.1	17.6	-2.5
172 Seychelles	27.3	21.2	-6.1

* Countries for which data for both 1995 and 2020 are available.



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