OPEN EUROPEAN DIALOGUE

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Highlights & Resources from the Last OED120 Policy Deep-Dive

Inclusive Leadership:
Parliamentary Perspectives on Gender Representation in Politics

22 May 2023

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE CONVERSATION

Disclaimer: during the exchange, the conversation focused mainly on women's inclusion in politics. Gender binary was used as an overarching category of analysis, with full acknowledgement of the existence of various other forms of gender identification and equally relevant concerns surrounding the under-representation or exclusion of other groups and identities.

1. STILL A 155-YEAR-LONG TREK TO POLITICAL EQUALITY

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index benchmarks the current state and evolution of gender parity across four key dimensions: 1. Economic Participation and Opportunity; 2. Educational Attainment; 3. Health and Survival; 4. Political Empowerment.

In 2022, the overall global gender gap was closed by almost 70%. Yet, **the political empowerment dimension was the one manifesting the most significant remaining gender gap** of all subindexes, with a global average of 22% and the broadest dispersion ratio across countries. At the current rate, **it will take us 155 years to close the political empowerment gender gap.**

Additionally, the progress in political empowerment for women has stalled below its 2019 rate with fewer women accessing parliament compared to previous elections. In particular, **the number of women in leadership positions is where the most dramatic lag is:** 60% of leadership posts in politics remain held by males (2.6 women for every 10 party leaders), with only 5 female prime ministers in the EU out of 27 member states.

2. BEST PRACTICES?

Best practices are few, very context-specific and hard to track in terms of impact. However, there are two key dimensions that, if creatively combined, drive change and progress: **institutional mechanisms and behavioural change.**

⚙️ 🧰 INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS

When it comes to accessing political leadership, simple quotas work up to a certain extent. It's important to **think creatively to push for solutions that strengthen instruments that complement quotas**.

>> Financial Conditionality on the Table!

The development and cooperation sectors use blended financial vehicles as part of their toolkit to attract investments supporting development projects. However, these instruments are not used within organizations that provide representation to EU citizens as much. The same should be done within political parties, using **financial conditionality to make funding available on the condition that recipients invest funds towards women's inclusion in politics.**

At the EU level, the European Commission has established the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, and there is a proposal to reform the Regulation on the Statutes and Funding of European Political Parties and European Political Foundations. Still, the proposal for financial gender conditionality remains limited in many aspects.

It is necessary to move beyond headcounts by implementing representation targets, quantifying sanctions, and offering incentives for those achieving concrete results. By altering financial conditionalities, parties can be compelled to prioritize gender equality and ensure a more representative political leadership for the 51.6% of Europe's population that is comprised of women.

💡 The Italian Case

At a Member State level, Italy is the case of a country where there are financial obligations to reinvest in projects promoting women's participation in politics. Party funding legislation sets that beneficiaries must ensure a minimum of 30% of women's representation in their internal bodies and a minimum of 40% for electoral lists. Complying parties receive a reward; those failing may be subjected to financial sanctions. Additionally, in some cases, the political parties are called to actively support women's access to politics by allocating 10% of their public revenues to initiatives in support of women's political participation or face sanctions.

👥 🧭 BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE

>> Better Awareness

Awareness-raising initiatives are another essential element to support women's political inclusion and fight imbalances in decision-making. There are good practice examples from Croatia, Ireland, Portugal, and Sweden that explored and experimented with **well-designed creative awareness-raising tools and campaigns.** Stakeholder involvement and grass-roots initiatives are also particularly effective in fighting gender stereotypes and unconscious biases.

At an institutional level, it's especially important to design and support initiatives that **help politicians, as individuals, realize how certain behaviours self-replicate inside political structures.** It's therefore **crucial to focus on current political leadership.**

3. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY INCLUSION?

There are different levels of inclusivity and representation to be considered, which should be kept conceptually separate and distinct but operationally intertwined to create genuinely inclusive political spaces.

Descriptive Representation: focuses on the numerical distribution of seats between women and men and the presence and proportional representation of women in elected positions, reflecting the gender composition of the population and statistical considerations.

Symbolic Representation: aims to signal solidarity, demonstrate a commitment to equality, and engage with gender-related concerns, even if it may not directly result in substantial policy changes. It shapes public perception, raises awareness, and influences public discourse, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive political environment.

Substantive Representation: emphasizes the importance of having women in political offices and decision-making bodies to ensure that women's perspectives, interests, and experiences are adequately represented and safeguarded in the political process by individuals who have insight into their perspective. It refers to the notion that elected representatives not only act as mere conduits for the preferences and interests of their constituents but also actively advocate for and address the substantive issues and concerns affecting those they represent.

Substantive representation is critical with specific policy issues: this is especially visible in the public health realm. For example, in many EU countries, the public health system reimburses medicines for a series of typically male diseases but doesn't do so for specifically female conditions; it's also the case of vaccine testing, mainly conducted on men and for which women might experience different side effects.

Substantive representation is also crucial to fighting feelings of non-inclusion, even within the system. During the conversation, we discussed the case of Canadian MP Mumilaaq Qaqqaq, who spoke out in the House of Commons about the inclusivity of institutions saying:

"I have never felt safe or protected in my position, […] I'm reminded every step of the way that I don't belong here."

4. DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: EMERGING ISSUES AND OPEN QUESTIONS

>> Open Questions:

- Why should we care about gender representation in politics? Does it make a difference? And how does one become a more inclusive leader?
- How can we develop good arguments and practices in support of better gender representation in politics?
- Will societies inexorably move towards better representation in politics? Or not really?

- Why is the process of gender inclusion so slow? Why does it look like a 150+ year fight despite positive results in many dimensions (more educational attainment, more participation in the job market, etc.)?

>> Gender and Leadership Styles

Are there desirable traits we look for in political leaders? According to some data, the preferred qualities are those usually associated with women. These include creativity, hard-working, eloquence, humility, and honesty.

It's clear that the way in which women and men have been socialised has an impact on their way of approaching political life and exercising political leadership. For example, there are studies that show differences in how men and women spend during their last mandate, or **associate men and women, tendentially, with different leadership styles: transactional leadership, and transformative inclusive leadership**, respectively. This also emerged during the COVID-19 emergency, where studies showed a correlation between differences in how the crisis was managed and the gender of the political leaders involved.

>> Practicing What We Preach for Better Decision-Making

Gender inclusion is not the solution to all other political and policy problems, but **the more significant the set of people we manage to include, the higher the chances of raising the quality of political leadership.** Gender inclusivity, in this sense, is instrumental to the final goal of better political culture, better leadership and better decision-making.

Gender inclusion is about the creation of real choices beyond tokenism and gender-oriented considerations only. It's about setting the table to include a comprehensive and diverse set of individuals so that people can designate the representative and political leaders they consider best for the job among a broader pool of people.

>> Mind the "Glass Cliff"!

The term "glass ceiling" refers to individuals being prevented from reaching top leadership positions despite their qualifications and capabilities because of biases, unequal treatment, and systemic obstacles.

Increasingly frequent are now "glass cliff situations", where **women are more likely to be assigned to leadership positions during times of crisis or difficult circumstances**, where the chances of success are lower, potentially setting them up for failure or increased scrutiny.

5. UNPOPULAR OPINIONS & CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Promoting gender representation in politics might be hindered by increased identity intersectionality. Other identities, such as ethnicity, may be perceived as more substantial or relevant.

The presence of more women in power, per se, doesn't bring more inclusivity and representation if leaders don't have a proper supporting equality and social change agenda.

The slow pace of gender representation growth in politics comes from power dynamics. In some cases, those in charge and with the power are reticent to share it, affecting the ability to create nurturing environments for others to participate equally. If we do not force change by continuing to push for more education, awareness and proactive structural measures, the process will remain very slow.

Why is there so much 'lip service' around gender inclusivity in politics? The topic has been heavily ideologised. Even if concrete actions would bring about positive change, the issue does have a heavy political flag and connotation, and political polarisation creates an impasse. **The fact that laws need a first name attached to them makes collaboration on the matter complicated.**

Any progress can be stopped. Economic hurdles and other pollical challenges might risk becoming more pressing than women's rights and inclusion, especially in the context of rising numbers of setbacks in various countries. As a result, there's a risk of having resources redirected to other efforts and priorities.

💡 IDEA – Could **coordinated and simultaneous initiatives** in support of greater gender inclusivity be established **across member states and national parliaments** to garner more attention from the media? Can being European, from the point of view of policymakers operating at a national level outside of EU institutions, be further explored?

📢 6. PARLIAMENTARY CALLS TO ACTION

During the conversation, two members of the Open European Dialogue expressed interest in connecting with colleagues to discuss joint initiatives promoting civil rights and strengthening political inclusivity.

Federica Onori, member of the Italian parliament and Secretary of the Committee for Foreign and EU Affairs, is looking for parliamentarians interested in working together on a **joint initiative to strengthen civil rights and support Iranian protestors against their government.**

Alessandra Maiorino, member of the Italian parliament and coordinator of the Committee for Civil Rights and Gender Policy of the Five-Star Movement (M5S), would like to connect with colleagues interested in organising a **joint event to raise awareness about women's civil rights and the increase of setbacks in various countries.**

Should you be interested in knowing more about these initiatives and/or contributing, please get in touch with **Rebecca Farulli** at rebecca@aproposgroup.org.

FURTHER RESOURCES

>> READ IT UP! | ***The Paradox of Parliament*** (Jonathan Malloy, University of Toronto Press – March 2023)

Jonathan Malloy discusses the major aspects of Parliament through the lens of paradoxical elements and competing logics to explain increasing dissatisfaction with Parliament and calls for reforms, with

attention given to representation and inclusivity, regarding gender, race, and additional forms of diversity.

>> EXPLORE TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES| **The Policymaker-Oriented Work of The European University Institute on Inclusive Leadership**

The Inclusive Leadership Initiative, headed by Costanza Hermanin and based at the European University Institute, provides new instruments, in the form of original research, policy dialogues and trainings, to transform leadership, starting with bridging the gender gap in European politics.

- IncluLeader - Inclusive Leadership for Sustainable Governance
- Training Politicians Towards a More Inclusive Leadership: A Proposal
- Inclusive Leadership: A Curriculum for Politicians

>> CRUNCH THE NUMBERS | **The OED Experts Datasets Made Available to Us**

- Slides showed during the conversation with backup data and charts on gender representation in politics. Get in touch if you would like more info on the datasets.