

18 Gender equality in public leadership

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Enabling the participation and representation of all groups in public life is important for building trust in government and sustaining vibrant and strong democracies. This chapter explores the links between gender equality in public decision making and trust in democratic institutions. The chapter also maps out recent trends in gender-balance in parliaments, cabinets and the judiciary across the OECD and discusses persistent and emerging barriers to women's participation and representation, including in leadership positions. Finally, the chapter describes some measures taken by OECD countries to enhance women's leadership in public decision-making roles.

Key findings

- Gender balance in public leadership positions has improved slowly and unevenly over the past five years, with backsliding in certain cases. Women held less than 35% of parliamentary seats and ministerial positions on average across the OECD in 2021, while representing 36% of judges in the Supreme Courts in OECD-COE countries in 2018.
- Women continue facing major roadblocks in accessing positions of power in parliaments, cabinets and judiciaries, such as gender stereotypes, work-life balance challenges, limited commitment by political parties to run and nominate women candidates, as well as sexual harassment and violence, including online hate speech and cyberviolence.

Despite recent progress, women’s representation in public decision-making positions remains low and uneven

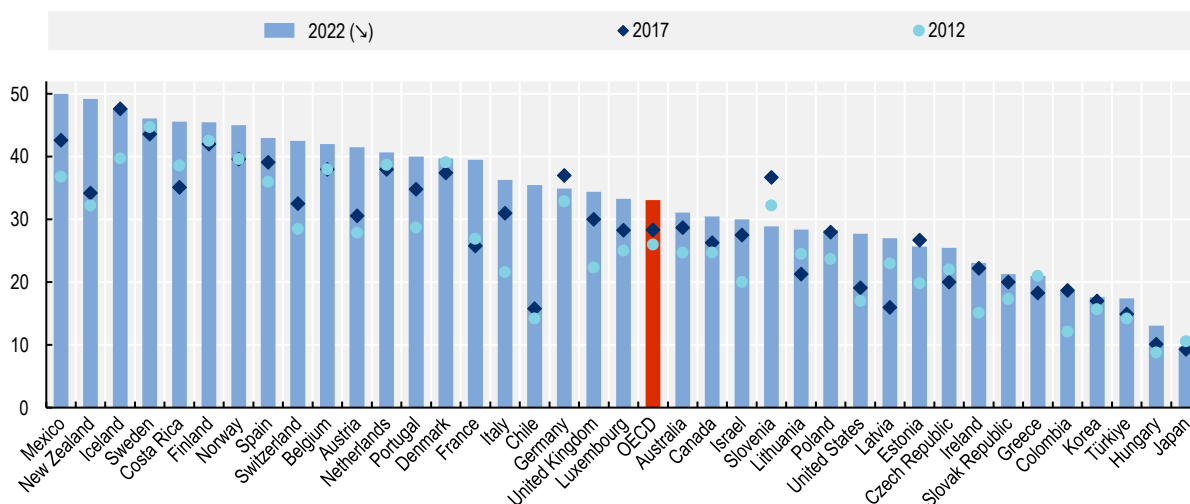
Gender equality in decision-making roles in parliaments, cabinets and judiciary has increased gradually in the OECD since 2017, but progress has been slow and uneven across countries, with several slide backs.

The average share of women in the lower/single house of parliaments in OECD countries increased from 28% to 33% between 2017 and 2022 (Figure 18.1; Chapter 2 for a global overview). Parliamentary shares of women range from over 45% in Mexico, New Zealand, Iceland, Sweden, Costa Rica and Finland to less than 15% in Hungary and Japan. Significant variation is also observed in the evolution of women’s share in parliaments. Over the past five years, most (32) OECD countries saw an increase in such share (for instance, Chile and New Zealand saw an important jump of 20 and 15 percentage points respectively), four maintained the same level (i.e. changes of less than 0.5 percentage points), while three experienced a decrease (for instance, Slovenia saw a drop of 8 percentage points) in women’s representation in parliament. However, more analysis is needed to determine if countries are able to sustain the progress attained.

Similar trends are seen in women’s representation at the ministerial level. Across the OECD, women’s average representation in cabinets increased by 6 percentage points between 2017 and 2021, but with considerable cross-national variation. Figure 18.2 shows that over the past five years, countries like Austria and Belgium saw significant advances – 34 percentage points, while the largest backslides were seen in Slovenia and Poland – 31 and 18 percentage points, respectively (OECD, 2021^[1]). By 2022, eight countries (Austria, Belgium, Canada, Costa Rica, Finland, France, Spain and Sweden) had 50% or more women in ministerial posts, while the share of women ministers was lowest in Japan and Poland.

Figure 18.1. Women remain under-represented in parliaments with wide variations among OECD countries

Share of women in seats in parliaments, lower-house or single-chamber, 2012, 2017 and 2022, percentage



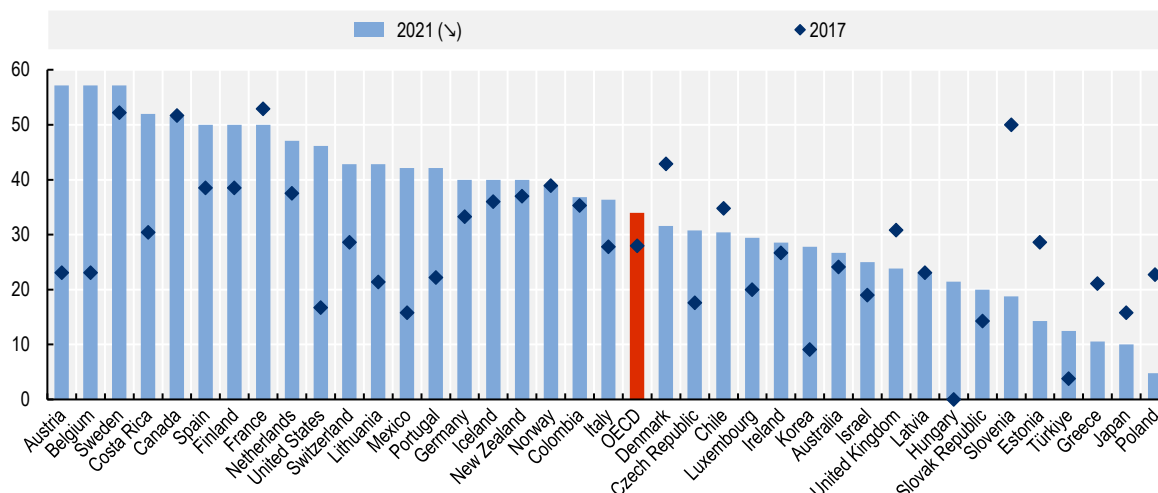
Note: Data represent the share of women in lower or single house of Parliaments as of 1 January 2022, 1 January 2017 and 31 October 2012. Data for Israel for 2021 correspond to the outgoing legislature as parliament was dissolved in December 2020.

Source: OECD (2021^[1]), *Government at a Glance 2021*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/1c258f55-en> and *Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) PARLINE database*, <https://data.ipu.org/>.

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Figure 18.2. Gender equality in ministerial positions is far from being achieved, having worsened in some OECD countries

Share of women among ministers, 2017 and 2021, percentage



Note: Data represent women appointed ministers as of 1 January of each year of reference. 2021 data for Türkiye were provided by national authorities.

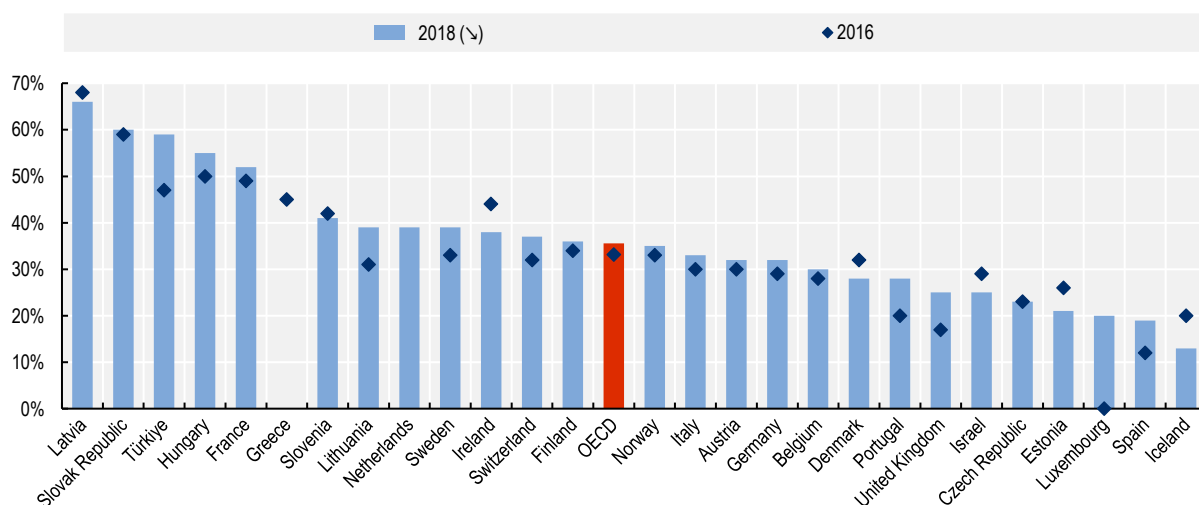
Source: OECD (2021^[1]), *Government at a Glance 2021*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/1c258f55-en>.

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Data for the judiciary in OECD-COE countries suggest a marginal increase of three percentage points in the average share of women judges between 2016 and 2018 (Figure 18.3). Hungary, France, Latvia, the Slovak Republic and Türkiye crossed the parity mark as of 2018, while Iceland, Luxembourg and Spain lagged behind with a share of 20% or less of women in the Supreme Courts. Luxembourg had the largest increase (20 percentage points) since 2016, while Iceland had the biggest setback (7 percentage points) in the share of women judges in Supreme Court. Looking at the share of women presidents of the Supreme Courts, the picture becomes bleaker. As of 2018, only seven out of 24 OECD-COE countries had a female president in their Supreme courts (CEPEJ, n.d.^[2]). However, variations in judicial systems (e.g. differences in the judicial training and career paths between common law and civil law systems) must be kept in mind when comparing gender balance in judiciaries across countries (OECD, 2021^[1]).

Figure 18.3. In most countries, less than four in ten Supreme Court judges are women

Share of women in professional judges in Supreme courts, 2016 and 2018, percentage



Note: Data on 24 OECD-COE countries. 2016 data are missing for the Netherlands and 2018 data are missing for Greece. The 2016 data for the United Kingdom is the share of female judges in England and Wales. The 2018 data for the United Kingdom is calculated as a simple average of the share of female judges in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Source: Council of Europe European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ), *CEPEJ-STAT (database)*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cepej/cepej-stat>.

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Barriers continue to be reported as persisting in women's pathway to leadership positions

The recent COVID-19 crisis bore a stark reminder of the gender imbalance in decision-making, as women made up only 24% of the members of ad hoc decision-making structures dealing with the pandemic globally (UNDP and UN Women, 2021^[3]). Women's participation in decision-making across the three branches of government continues to be faced with several barriers.

Public leadership roles (e.g. judges and ministers) often require higher flexibility in terms of relocation, rotations, travel or working hours. The disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women, as well as work-life balance challenges, create additional barriers for women to access these positions. Other obstacles reported by countries in the 2021 OECD Survey on Gender Mainstreaming and Governance (2021 GMG Survey) include gender stereotypes and limited professional development opportunities for

women legal practitioners. OECD countries identify gender stereotypes and work-life balance challenges as a persisting barrier at every stage of the career pipeline for a woman parliamentarian – such as being elected to the legislative bodies, actively participating and remaining in these positions, and accessing leadership roles within the parliament (OECD, 2022^[4]). In addition, the 2021 GMG Survey highlighted that limited commitment by political parties to running women candidates can greatly hamper women’s chances of being elected by respondent countries, while violence and harassment against women parliamentarians can discourage them from actively participating in their role or remaining in elected office. Similarly, OECD countries identified the limited commitment by political parties to nominate women parliamentarians in leadership roles and the reservation of leadership positions for senior parliamentarians as key barriers for women’s access to leadership roles in the legislature (OECD, 2022^[4]).

The growing use of digital fora and social media platforms is posing new threats to women and other under-represented groups in politics, who can be significantly more likely to experience online abuse and harassment and be the target of hate speech and gender-based disinformation campaigns (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020^[5]). Cyber violence and gender-based disinformation can have severe consequences for women’s participation in public life, as they may be discouraged from seeking political careers, be pushed out of politics, and be prevented from achieving leadership roles.

Countries are steadily taking measures to enhance gender equality in leadership roles

OECD countries have continued to put in place a range of measures to reduce existing barriers to women’s leadership in public decision-making positions, including laws and statutory instruments creating formalised requirements for public leadership positions, non-binding guidelines for public institutions, or the incorporation of gender-equality goals in leadership in broader strategic frameworks, among others.

Formalised requirements for public leadership positions, voluntary quotas and other special measures

Quotas can belong to two main categories: reserved seats that guarantee the election of a fixed number or percentage of women candidates; and legislated quotas and voluntary party quotas which ensure that a minimum number of women are elected (OECD, 2014^[6]). If implemented effectively, quotas can contribute to quickly closing gender gaps in representation: evidence suggests that quotas can have a positive impact on women’s representation in elected positions (Kerevel, 2019^[7]). Yet, the effectiveness of both legislated and voluntary quotas highly depends on their level, the scope of incentives to comply, as well as the strength of sanctions for non-compliance.

Quotas are often considered controversial, since they can be perceived as a “gift” or a “favour” to women that interferes with the normal democratic process (OECD, 2019^[8]). Furthermore, to produce long-term normative change, they should be accompanied by efforts to raise social awareness of the value that gender-balanced representation has at all levels. In fact, as quotas tend to be seen as “special temporary measures”, it is a common misconception that they are no longer needed once women’s representation has quickly increased, as it is easy to underestimate how deeply rooted social norms are and how long it takes to bring about durable change.

Since 2017, at least four OECD countries (i.e. Iceland, Japan, Mexico and Portugal) have introduced new or renewed legal/statutory instruments to facilitate women’s access to leadership positions in public institutions (Box 18.1).

Box 18.1. Examples of legal/statutory instruments recently introduced to promote women's access to leadership in elected offices across OECD countries

In 2021, **Iceland** introduced amendments to the act of Standing Orders of the parliament (*Althingi*) to ensure that the proportion of women and men in committees, councils and boards on behalf of Althingi is as equal as possible. **Japan** adopted the Act on Promotion of Gender Equality in the Political Field in 2018, with several stipulations regarding the gender balance of House of Representatives, the House of Councillors, and the councils of local governments. The Act outlines the responsibilities of the national and local governments, as well as political organisations (e.g. political parties). The amendment in 2021 provides examples of voluntary efforts that political organisations should engage in. In 2019, **Mexico** reformed ten articles of its Political Constitution to reflect the principle of “Parity for Everything”. This represents the aim of advancing towards balanced participation of women and men in positions of power and decision-making in all spheres of life (political, economic and social). The reforms cover the three orders of government, the autonomous organisms, the candidacies of the political parties, as well as the election of representatives for the city councils in the municipalities with an indigenous population. In addition, the reforms created the provision for gender-inclusive language. Similarly, **Portugal's** Law 1/2019 of 29 March raised the minimum threshold for men and women in the electoral lists to national and European Parliament, elective bodies of municipalities, and members of the Parish Councils from 33% to 40%.

Source: Information provided by the Government of Iceland in 2021; Government of Japan (2018^[9]), *Act on Promotion of Gender Equality in the Political Field (Act No. 28 of 23 May 2018)*, <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/ja/laws/download/3294/09/h30Aa000280104en13.0.pdf>; Government of Costa Rica (2017^[10]), *Circular n° 088 de Corte Plena, 25 de Mayo de 2017*, <https://vlex.co.cr/vid/702705637>.

Gender equality measures to promote equal access to political representation

Political parties can also adopt voluntary gender quotas and other special measures (e.g. actively promoting women's recruitment and nomination, funding, etc.) to promote the presence of female candidates in party ranks and lists during elections. Internal political party dynamics and culture can play a relevant role in enhancing the effectiveness of gender balance initiatives and improving women's representation in Parliaments, while also strengthening the positive impact of legislated quotas, when they already exist (OECD, 2019^[8]).

In order to promote gender-balanced representation, gender equality mechanisms can be introduced within electoral management bodies to make them more gender-sensitive. By overseeing and organising the electoral process, these bodies can play a role in promoting gender equality in all phases of the electoral process and in having more female candidates elected into office (OECD, 2019^[8]).

Making parliaments a more gender-friendly workplace

Governments are taking steps to understand better the specific challenges that women in politics face in their respective countries through deep-dive studies and assessments. In Canada, in 2019, the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women tabled the report “Elect Her: A Roadmap for Improving the Representation of Women in Canadian Politics” that studied the barriers while presenting 14 recommendations to promote women's access to electoral politics across all levels (House of Commons Canada, 2019^[11]). The Finnish National Institute of Health and Welfare commissioned a study on the obstacles to gender equality in parliaments and the progress made in this regard (Siukola, Kuusipalo and Haapea, 2020^[12]).

Initiatives aiming at making parliaments a more gender-friendly workplace have contributed to improving parliamentarians' work and ultimately aim to transforming parliamentary work cultures (OECD, 2019^[8]). Within parliaments, legislatures can adopt measures to facilitate work-life balance for parliamentarians and judges, especially for those with caring responsibilities. Taking initiatives allowing parliamentarians to successfully combine work and family life and encouraging its uptake by both women and men can have a positive impact on representation and gender-balanced leadership (OECD, 2019^[8]). Some countries have introduced novel measures such as inauguration of breastfeeding rooms in the legislative building (Switzerland), or reserved parking spots and washrooms with changing tables for parliamentarians with children (Canada). Other examples include measures to incentivise men and women to take parental leave and measures to define working and sitting hours at the parliament (OECD, 2019^[8]). Some parliaments/legislatures have started addressing issues related to gender-sensitive language and representation in internal and external parliamentary materials, as well as to promote male parliamentarians' engagement and support to advance gender equality efforts.

Putting a halt to harassment and violence against women leaders

In the past five years, countries have also started taking note of the specific concern of harassment and violence against women leaders, especially in politics. For example, the Legislative Assembly of Costa Rica is currently discussing a bill aiming to promote the political participation of women with provisions eliminating the conditions that lead women to discontinue participating in politics, including by preventing, addressing, punishing and eradicating violence against women in politics. Canada has also introduced an enactment that amends the Canada Labour Code and the Parliamentary Employment and Staff Relations Act to strengthen the existing framework for the prevention of harassment and violence, including sexual harassment and sexual violence, in the workplace. In the judiciary, countries can establish codes of conduct that explicitly promote gender equality and inclusion and prohibit any form of discrimination, sexism and harassment, as well as complaint and disciplinary mechanisms.

Supporting better diversity and representation in the judiciary

In addition to the measures related to creating gender equal workplace, some countries (Austria, Colombia, France and Italy) have put in place measurement indicators to monitor women's representation in the judiciary. Some other countries also adopted dedicated strategies or action plans for better diversity and representation in the judiciary (Box 18.2). Countries can establish judicial codes of conduct that explicitly promote gender equality and inclusion and prohibit any form of discrimination, sexism and harassment, as well as complaint and disciplinary mechanisms.

Box 18.2. Promoting diversity and representation in the judiciary in the OECD area

Spain adopted the II Equality Plan for the Judicial Career in 2020, which provides an overview of the persisting challenges in ensuring gender equality in judicial careers and develops 20 lines of action including on professional development, dealing with violence and harassment, and supporting work-life balance. Similarly, the judiciary of England and Wales (**United Kingdom**) published the Judicial Diversity and inclusion Strategy 2022-25 with the overarching aim of increasing the personal and professional diversity of the judiciary at all levels, including in terms of gender equality. The strategy focuses on improving the applicant pool and supporting the inclusion, retention and progress of professionals from diverse backgrounds in the judiciary.

Source: Government of Spain (2021^[13]), *II Plan de Igualdad de la Carrera Judicial* [II Equality Plan for the Judicial Career], <https://laadministraciondia.inap.es/noticia.asp?id=1216798>; Government of the United Kingdom (2020^[14]), *Judicial Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2020*, <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Judicial-Diversity-and-Inclusion-Strategy-2020-2025-v2.pdf>.

The way forward

There is a strong need for OECD governments to consider taking initiatives to further facilitate progress towards gender equality in politics, also in leadership positions. Measures could include, for example, a mix of mandatory and voluntary instruments, incentives, and sanctions (e.g. targets, quotas or pay reporting requirements) as well as gender audits of parliamentary practices and procedures. Further efforts should also be made to eliminate cyber violence and harassment, raise awareness among legislators and society at large on the benefits of gender equality in politics and policy making, address structural barriers to women's participation in political life, and strengthen leadership skills to promote gender equality. Encouraging women's application to judicial and especially leadership positions (e.g. through creating a roster or pipeline of eligible candidates), making selection processes more gender-sensitive (e.g. through gender balanced panels, bias reduction measures), as well as supporting women's talent after their entry into the judicial office (e.g. through mentoring, leadership and capacity development programmes) is key. Countries could also undertake other actions to safeguard a gender-sensitive working culture in the judiciary, including strengthening complaint mechanisms for discrimination and harassment; ensuring references to gender-sensitive conduct in the Code of Judicial Conduct; ensuring the use of gender-sensitive language in courtrooms and public communication; and developing training materials to promote a gender-sensitive work culture within courtrooms.

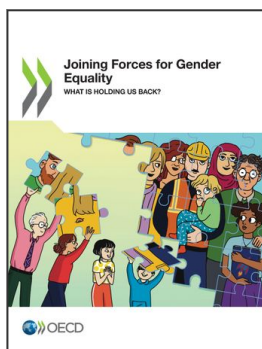
Overall, it is critical to establish a sustained pipeline of eligible women politicians and judges who can be promoted to senior decision-making levels in political and administrative institutions. Political parties, legislative bodies, judiciaries, and judicial commissions play essential roles as not only lawmakers and oversight bodies but also gender equitable workplaces that have the potential to nurture, mentor, and promote women's leadership skills and availability to fulfil positions of leadership.

Key policy messages

- More significant and sustained efforts are needed to remove persisting barriers and to facilitate progress towards gender equality at the top in politics and judiciary, and thus strengthen democratic representation and trust in public institutions.
- Governments could do more to promote inclusiveness within elected bodies, through a mix of mandatory and voluntary instruments, incentives, and sanctions; gender audits of parliamentary practices and procedures; efforts to eliminate cyber violence and harassment; awareness raising actions among legislators and society; measures addressing structural barriers to women's participation in political life; and initiatives to strengthen leadership skills to promote gender equality.
- Parliaments and judicial institutions should intensify their efforts to establish a sustained pipeline of eligible women candidates who can be promoted to senior decision-making levels, including through gender-sensitive hiring and promotion processes as well as actions to safeguard gender-sensitive working cultures.

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From:
Joining Forces for Gender Equality
What is Holding us Back?

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/67d48024-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

Tarani, Meeta (2023), "Gender equality in public leadership", in OECD, *Joining Forces for Gender Equality: What is Holding us Back?*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/ce8e4130-en>

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