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Women’s Representation in Local Government: A Global Analysis

Paper prepared by:

Ionica Berevoescu and Julie Ballington¹

¹ This paper results from a collective effort by UN Women’s Political Participation team over the past 5 years.

Introduction

Women's rights to political participation, on equal terms with men, and shared power between women and men in decision-making bodies at all levels of government, recognized in international normative frameworks² and emphasized in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action³, are reflected, decades later, in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals. As agreed upon by Governments of countries, SDG target 5.5 is formulated as "ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life".⁴ The renewed focus on equal political participation at *all levels* of government is also transparent in the choice of indicators for monitoring progress in achieving this target. In addition to former MDG indicator on women's representation in parliaments, current SDG indicator 5.5.1a, the SDG monitoring framework includes a new indicator, 5.5.1b, on women's representation in local government.⁵ This new addition expands the research and global data on women's political participation beyond parliaments. The past three decades have predominantly focused on national legislatures, and for good reasons. Parliaments are countries' highest legislative bodies, with powers to craft and change national legislation and oversee national budgets. They also have a relatively small number of members that are easily counted and captured in a global indicator, on a regular basis, as done by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Year after year, the numbers collected by IPU have told the story of large disparities between the number of women and men in legislative bodies, uneven women's representation across countries, and slow progress over time.

The story of women's representation in local government has largely remained untold. Despite some country case studies and regional initiatives, global data and research on this level of government lagged, resulting in a major knowledge gap. The integration of SDG indicator 5.5.1b in the SDG monitoring framework, acknowledges the importance of a whole of government approach and women's voices and leadership at local level. Local government is the result of decentralization of legislative, executive and administrative powers from national to local levels for the purpose of improving governance on local matters and enabling a more direct and inclusive participation of different groups of population in local decision-making. In this regard, SDG indicator 5.5.1b takes note of a much more numerous and diverse group of women and the realization of their rights, as well as their role as local leaders in achieving sustainable development: research is showing that women in local decision-making positions redefine local priorities by being more inclusive,⁶ prioritizing family-friendly policies and measures,⁷ and in some contexts, contributing to increased gender equality in terms of income, employment and parental leave.⁸

This paper presents new comparative global data and data-based analysis on women's representation in local government produced, for the first time, by UN Women, as the sole custodian agency for SDG indicator 5.5.1b. UN Women was nominated as custodian agency for the indicator in 2016, finalized its

² The Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1953), Art. II and III; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), Art.2 and 25; and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), Art.3 and 7.

³ Beijing Platform for Action, Paras 1, 44, 181 and 190(a).

⁴ United Nations General Assembly, 2015.

⁵ United Nations General Assembly, 2017.

⁶ Kathlene, L., 1994; Tilly, L.A. and Gurin, P., 1992; Weikart, L.A., Chen, G., Williams, D.W. and Hromic, H., 2007.

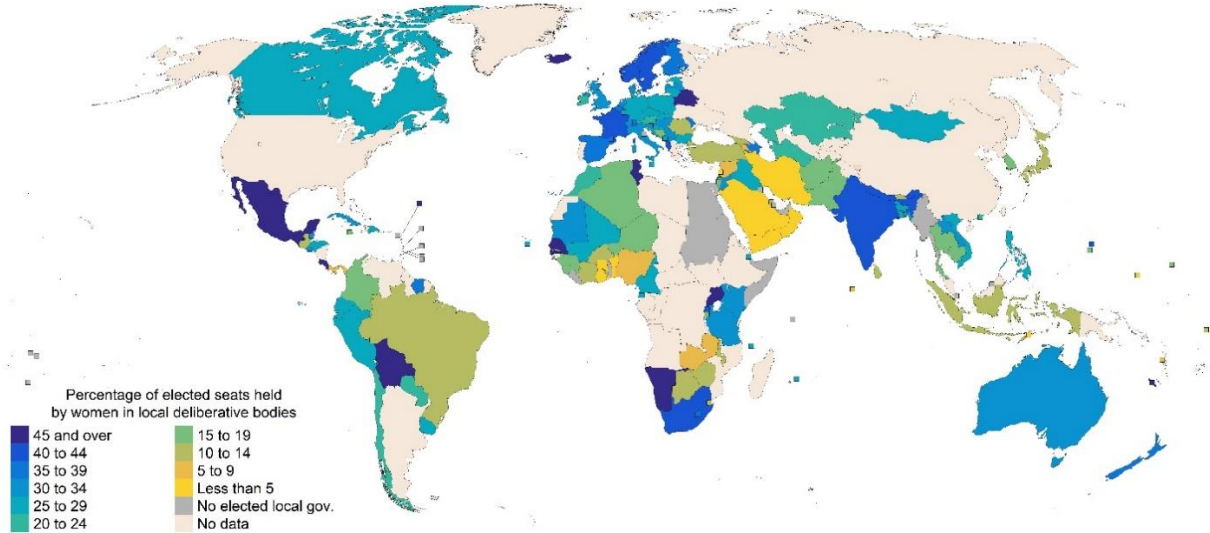
⁷ Chattopadhyay, R. and Duflo, E., 2004; Bratton, K. and Ray, L., 2002; Holman, M. R., 2014; Smith, A., 2014; Svaleryd, H., 2009; Funk, K.D. and Philips, A.Q., 2019.

⁸ Wängnerud, L. and Sundell, A., 2012.

methodology in 2017, and started compiling data from countries in 2018. As per its methodology, the indicator is measured as the proportion of elected seats held by women in deliberative bodies of local government. The data used are official data on elections results produced by national Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs), reported by National Statistical Offices (NSOs), and compiled by UN Women with the support of UN Regional Commissions. Unless otherwise stated, this brief uses the data on most recent local election results as at 1st of January 2020, currently available for 133 countries and areas (as presented on map 1).

The analysis shows that women’s representation in local government is higher than in parliament, but still not on equal terms with men: very few countries have reached gender balance in local decision-making bodies, and in the majority of countries women’s under-representation is severe. Legislated gender quotas have a significant positive impact on women’s representation in local government, particularly in developing regions, and can disrupt the cycle of male-dominated political leadership. Electoral systems based on proportional representation and mixed systems are also associated with higher representation of women at local level, but, in the absence of quotas, their impact is less significant. Finally, the brief discusses remaining data gaps on women’s political participation at local level, including data disaggregation issues, underused electoral data, and the need for new data collection tools to capture women’s full and effective participation in local government.

Map 1. Women’s representation in local deliberative bodies, as at 1st of January 2020



Source: UN Women, 2020a.

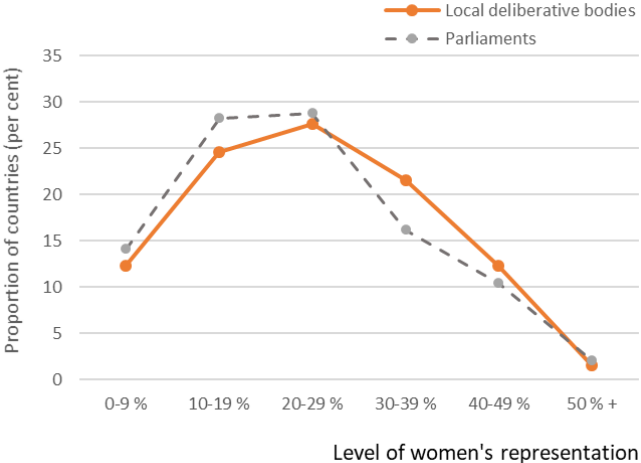
Women’s representation in local government

Women’s representation in local deliberative bodies is higher than in parliament, but still not on equal terms with men.

Of the 6.02 million elected members in deliberative bodies of local government counted by SDG indicator 5.5.1b in 133 countries and areas, as at 1st of January 2020, only 2.18 million (36%) are women. This places women’s representation in local government higher than in national parliaments (25%), but not yet close

to parity. Only 15 per cent of countries (shown in darker blue on map 1) have reached over 40 per cent women in local decision-making bodies, and an additional 21 per cent of countries have women’s representation between 30 and 40 per cent. However, in a majority of countries, women are severely underrepresented. Most countries (53%) fall between 10 and 30 per cent women’s representation, and 12 per cent of countries (shown in yellow on map 1) have less than 10 per cent women’s representation, a distribution that is similar to the one observed for women’s representation in parliaments (figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage distribution of countries by level of women’s representation in local deliberative bodies and parliaments, as at 1st of January 2020

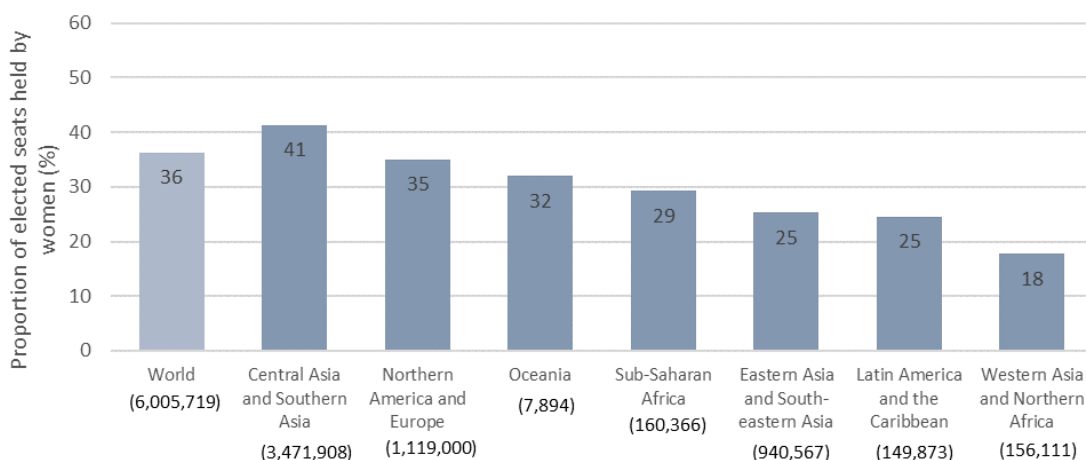


Source: UN Women, 2020a, based on data on women’s representation in local government available for 133 countries and areas. Data on women’s representation in parliament based on IPU 2020.

Note: Distributions based on data on women’s representation in local government available for 133 countries and areas and data on women’s representation in parliament available for 191 countries.

Women’s representation is highest in Central and Southern Asia (41 per cent) and Europe and Northern America (35 per cent) – driven up by high levels of women’s representation in countries with large numbers of councillors, such as India and France, respectively – while lowest in Western Asia and Northern Africa (18 per cent) (figure 2). In almost all regions there are countries with gender-balanced local governments (as seen on map 1), showing that progress is possible across the world.

Figure 2. Proportion of elected seats held by women in local deliberative bodies by SDG region, as at 1st of January 2020



Source: UN Women, 2020a.

Note: Averages weighted by number of local government members. Number of local government members in the world and each region shown in parenthesis.

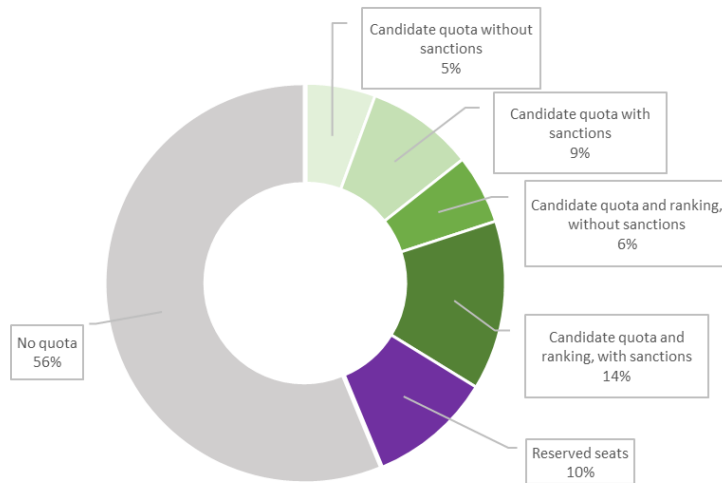
The impact of legislated gender quotas

Nearly half of countries use legislated quotas to improve women’s representation in local government.

Legislated gender quotas aiming to increase women’s representation in local deliberative bodies are implemented by 44 per cent of countries with elected local governments. These measures are provided for in the legal framework of a country, including constitutions, electoral laws, parity laws or additional legislation. Candidate quotas, typically requiring a minimum proportion of women to be included in a candidate list, are most often used, in 34 per cent of countries, while reserved seats for women are used in 10 per cent of countries.

Different types of legislated candidate quotas are implemented by countries (figure 3). The targeted proportion of women candidates varies between 10 and 50 per cent, with most countries with quota aiming for 30 to 40 per cent, while only a quarter for 50 per cent. In addition to a targeted representation of women among candidates, candidate quotas may require that women and men are ranked in a balanced manner across the candidate lists, thus giving women a better chance to be included in the short list of candidates obtaining sufficient votes to be elected to the office. This is the case for 19 per cent of all countries. Also, 22 per cent of countries have sanctions or incentives in place related to non-compliance with the target and ranking requirements, including, most often, rejection of the candidate list.

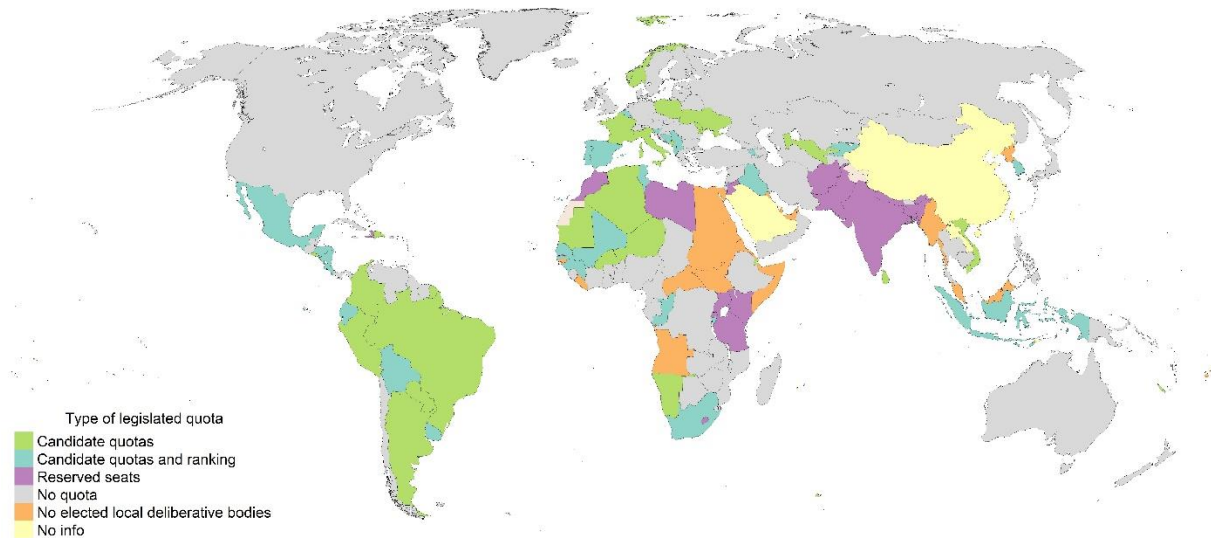
Figure 3. Percentage distribution of countries with elected local deliberative bodies by type of legislated gender quota, as at 1st of January 2020



Source: UN Women, 2020b. Based on information on national legal frameworks for 160 countries with elected local government.

Among the different types of quota, legislated candidate quotas (shown in green and blue on map 2) are most common in Latin America, Europe and partially in Africa, while reserved seats (shown in purple on map 2) are used in some countries in Asia and Africa.

Map 2. Types of legislated gender quotas used by countries, as at 1st of January 2020

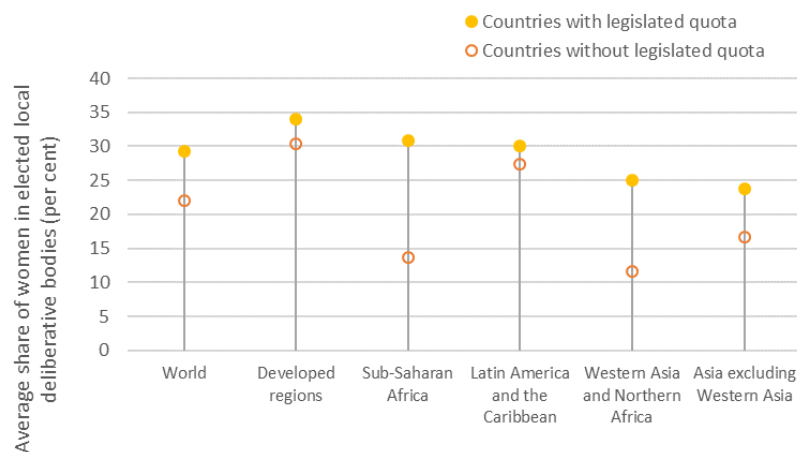


Source: UN Women, 2020b.

Countries using legislated quotas have higher representation of women in local government.

Legislated gender quotas are effective measures to increase women’s representation in local government, particularly in developing regions. Worldwide, countries with legislated quotas have higher women’s representation in local government compared to those without quota, by 7 percentage points on average (figure 4). In sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Africa and Western Asia, and remaining of Asia, use of quota increases a country’s representation of women by 16, 13 and 7 percentage points respectively.

Figure 4. Average women’s representation in elected local deliberative bodies by use of quota and geographical regions, as at 1st of January 2020



Source: UN Women, 2020a and 2020b.

Note: Analysis based on unweighted averages for 126 countries with data on SDG indicator 5.5.1b and information on quotas. Other regions and sub-regions not presented due to small number of countries with data and/or with quota.

The adoption of gender quotas at local level has changed significantly country trends in women’s representation at local level, not only in developing regions, but also in developed ones. Although data trends for SDG indicator 5.5.1b are not yet available, existing research based on official data illustrates the leap in women’s rate of election after implementing quotas. For instance, in France, the parity law introduced in 2000 changed women’s share in municipal councils from 26 per cent in 1995 elections to 48 per cent in 2001 elections.⁹ In Slovenia, the legislated quota introduced in 2005 increased the proportion of women elected in municipal office from 13 per cent in 2002 to 22 per cent in 2006.¹⁰ In Spain, quotas introduced in 2007 and 2011 resulted in an increased of women’s representation from 26 per cent in 2003 to 35 per cent in 2015 elections.¹¹

⁹ Bird, 2003.

¹⁰ Dahlerup and Freidenvall, 2011.

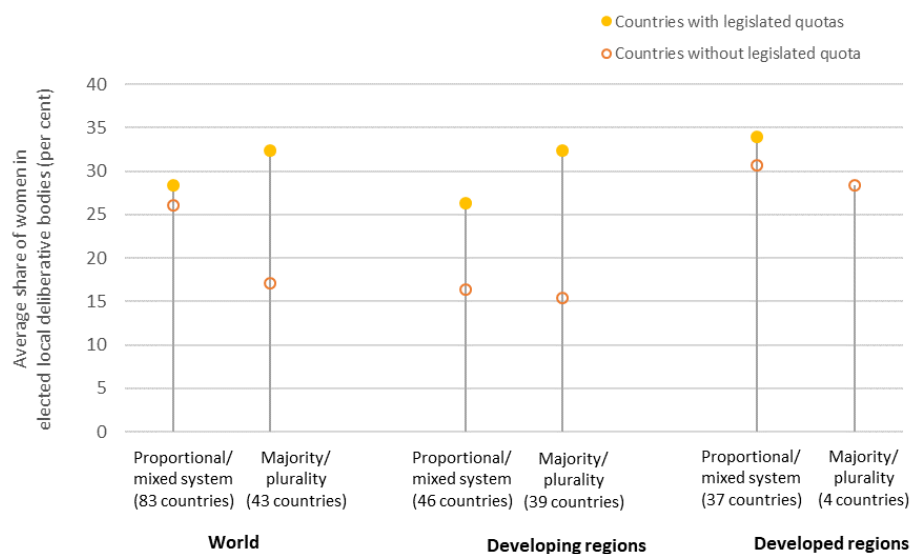
¹¹ Cabaleiro-Casal and Buch-Gómez, 2019; Verge and Troupe, 2011.

The role of electoral systems

Compared to quotas, electoral systems have less impact on women's representation at local level.

Proportional representation and mixed electoral systems are, overall, associated with higher representation of women at local level. On average, women's representation is 28 per cent in proportional representation systems, 26 per cent in mixed systems, and 22 per cent in majority/plurality systems.¹² However, as shown in figure 5, the impact of electoral systems on women's representation is much smaller when controlling for development regions and quotas. In developing regions, in the absence of quotas, women's representation is only 1 percentage point lower in majority/plurality systems compared to proportional/mixed systems, while in developed regions, 3 percentage points lower. Furthermore, in developing regions, the use of quota increases women's representation to higher levels in majority/plurality systems compared to proportional/mixed systems.

Figure 5. Average women's representation in elected local deliberative bodies by type of electoral system, use of quota and development regions, as at 1st of January 2020



Source: UN Women, 2020a and 2020b.

Note: Analysis based on unweighted averages for 126 countries (83 countries in developing regions and 43 in developed regions).

Beyond national averages

Research has shown that women's representation in local government varies within countries. Women tend to be more severely underrepresented in less urbanized areas holding more traditional gender norms,¹³ and in political office or positions with more power, particularly expenditure power, such as in higher levels of government or executive positions.¹⁴ Women's representation may also vary by other characteristics. Paths to local power are different for women compared to men, with women's networks

¹² Unweighted averages.

¹³ Kjaer, 2010; Sundström and Stockemer, 2015.

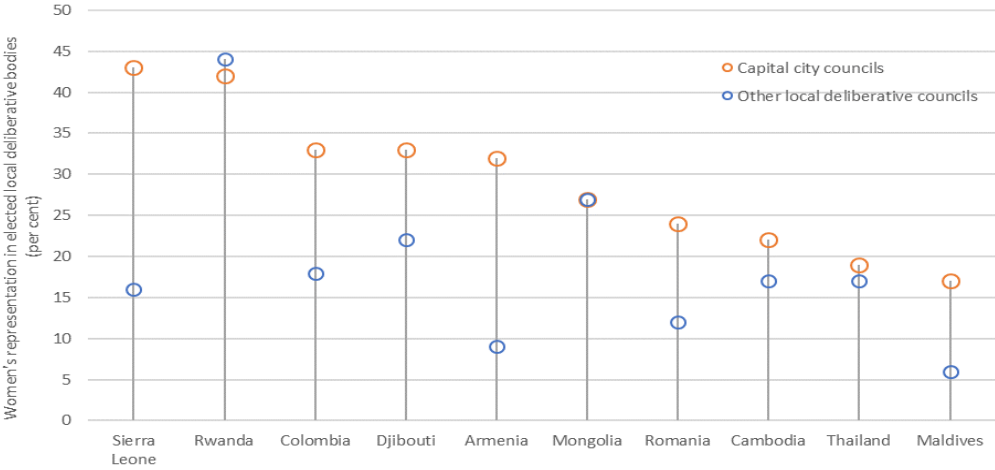
¹⁴ Bochel and others, 2003.

and civic volunteerism being more important¹⁵, while political parties, although less influential at local level, still have an impact on women’s representation in local government.¹⁶ These support structures and interest and skill building opportunities may be less easily available to disabled women, women in economically marginalized groups, ethnic minority groups, indigenous populations, youth and LGBTIQ+ communities. Current official data for SDG indicator 5.5.1b can provide some evidence for existing disparities within countries, as shown in the highlights below.

Capital city councils are leading the change in women’s representation in local government.

Capital cities typically have higher levels of women’s representation compared to the rest of a country, as illustrated in figure 6 by countries with data available. Apart from Armenia, where Yerevan is one of the only three cities in the country that has legislated gender quota, the difference in between the capital city and the rest of country is not determined by differences in the legislated quotas or electoral systems.

Figure 6. Proportion of elected seats held by women in local deliberative bodies in capital city countries and other local deliberative bodies, in countries with data available, as at 1st of January 2020



Source: UN Women, 2020a.

Executive positions in local government remain out of women’s reach.

While SDG indicator 5.5.1b does not cover local executive positions such as mayors or equivalent heads of the executive, available data show that women’s representation in these more powerful positions are lower compared to their representation in deliberative bodies. In Europe, for instance, the share of women among mayors or equivalent executive positions at municipal level in 2019 is twice lower than among municipal councillors, 15 percent compared to 30 per cent in 2019.¹⁷ Similar patterns are observed in countries from other regions, as shown by official data provided by countries in the context of SDG data compilation.¹⁸ For instance, in Republic of Korea women hold 3 per cent of local government chiefs and

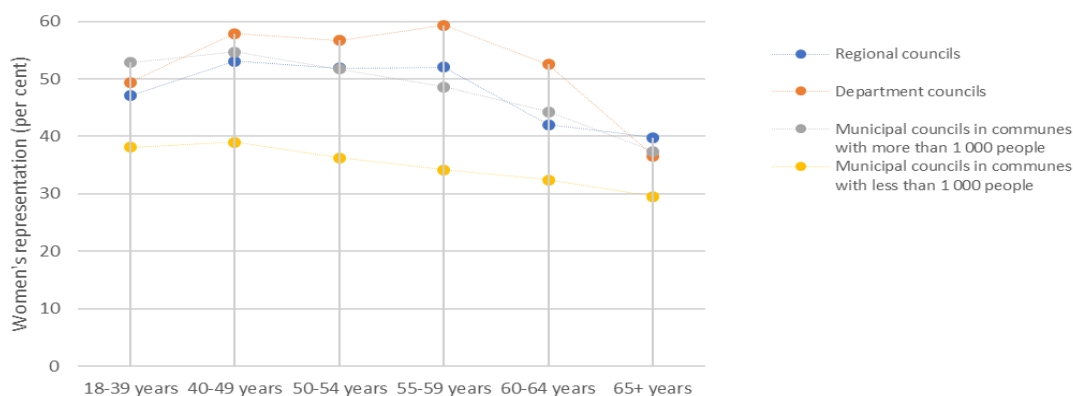
¹⁵ Merritt, 1977; Pini and McDonald, 2011.
¹⁶ Bochel and others, 2003; Sundström and Stockemer, 2015.
¹⁷ Calculations by UN Women based on data for 36 European countries from EIGE, available at <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs>.
¹⁸ UN Women, 2020a.

19 per cent of positions in local deliberative bodies. In Uganda, the corresponding proportions for executive heads and councillors are 1 and 48 per cent respectively, while in Peru, 5 and 30 per cent respectively.

Younger (but also older) women may be less represented in local government bodies.

In France, for example, data on representation in deliberative bodies of local government disaggregated by sex, age, and tier of local government (figure 7) show that women are better represented in the age groups from 40 to 59 years, by comparison to older-age groups, suggesting a generational shift in accessing political office. Underrepresentation is also more severe in the younger reproductive-age groups, when women tend to spend more time in caring for their children. The data also show that women’s representation is systematically lower in smaller communities, likely to be linked to the use of a majority electoral system at that level (by comparison with the proportional representation system used in the other tiers) and/or persistence of patriarchal values in more rural areas.

Figure 7. Proportion of elected seats held by women in local deliberative bodies by age groups and tiers of local government, France, as at 1st of January 2020



Source: French Ministry of Interior, Department of elections and political studies, available at <https://www.collectivites-locales.gouv.fr/etudes-et-statistiques-locales>

How far we’ve come in monitoring women’s political participation at local level

Great progress in data availability, but some countries still face challenges

The inclusion of an indicator on women’s representation in local government in the SDG monitoring framework has addressed a major data gap on women’s political participation. For the first time, global comparable data based on official statistical sources are compiled and made available on a regular basis. Three quarters of countries with elected local governments are covered so far and the data gathered provide a snapshot of the current situation and the baseline for monitoring and analysis of future trends at country, regional and global levels. Nevertheless, some countries still face challenges in producing data for SDG indicator 5.5.1b, particularly countries where the results of local elections are not centralized or not maintained electronically and the information on candidates and winners of elections is not collected by “sex”. Systematic use of data on electoral results is also hampered in countries where the EMBs have not been integrated in the National Statistical Systems (NSSs), EMBs’ statistical mandate has not been

made clear in laws rules or regulation guiding their work, and data-sharing agreements with other entities of NSSs have not been put in place.

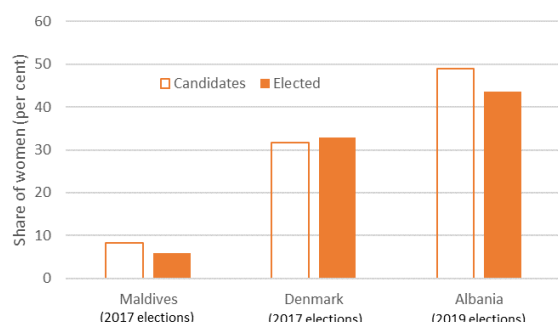
Data disaggregation needed to capture the SDG principle of Leaving No One Behind

Some data disaggregations exist but are not enough to capture entirely SDG's principle of leaving no one behind. Data for SDG indicator 5.5.1b are compiled disaggregated by tier of local government, with some countries providing additional data by geographical areas and age, as shown in this paper. These additional dimensions of disaggregation, together with others such as urban/rural areas and political party representation, are likely to be available or can be easily integrated in data collection systems in many countries. However, data disaggregation to understand which categories of women are more often denied access to local decision-making positions – whether disabled women, women in economically marginalized groups, ethnic minority groups, indigenous populations, youth or LGBTIQ+ – is missing. Most used source of data for SDG indicator 5.5.1b is administrative electoral data on election results produced by EMBs. EMBs are typically equipped to generate cost-effective and timely data, however, the information on personal characteristics of candidates and elected officials they collect may be limited and restricted by electoral laws and own mandates. Alternative sources – such as surveys targeting local government members – may provide additional individual-level information for data disaggregation, including information that may be considered sensitive, if privacy and confidentiality of information are properly preserved.

Data on electoral participation available, but underused

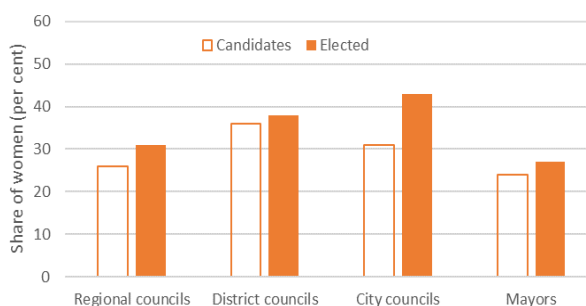
Data on other dimensions of women's political participation at local level, beyond SDG indicator 5.5.1b, exist but are underused. This is the case of electoral administrative data on voter registration, voter turnout, and candidates. In particular, data on electoral candidates can explain the level of women's representation in local government, by showing whether women entered the competition for local elections, in the first place, and, if they entered, whether their chances to be elected are lower or higher than men's. For example, as shown in figure 8, in the case of Maldives and Albania, the share of women elected is lower than the share of women candidates, pointing out to the lower chances of women candidates to be elected in those two countries. In Denmark, on the other hand, women and men candidates have a similar chance of being elected, while in New Zealand, women candidates have higher chances of being elected by comparison to men (figure 9). Additional data on women candidates and elected as independents or on political party lists can also contribute to understanding women's paths to local power.

Figure 8. Share of women among candidates and elected candidates for local deliberative bodies in selected countries



Source: UN Women based on data reported by Albania Institute of Statistics, Maldives National Bureau of Statistics, and Statistics Denmark.

Figure 9. Share of women among candidates and elected candidates in local government by type of position, New Zealand, 2019 elections



Source: UN Women based on New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs, 2019.

Additional data needed to capture women’s full and equal participation

Additional data to capture “women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership”, as stated in the target 5.5. of the SDG monitoring framework, would require development of new data collection tools based on sample surveys on local government members and electoral candidates. Relevant topics include challenges in reaching positions of decision-making, discrimination and violence against women candidates and in local office, access to deliberative and executive leadership positions and committee groups within local government, and participation in decision-making processes.

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