

Promoting Women's Participation in Political and Public Life in the OSCE Region

Discussion Paper for the Sixty-fifth Session of the
Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 65), Expert Group Meeting

‘Women’s full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls’

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OSCE commitments related to the promotion of women's participation in political and public life

This discussion paper was prepared by Ajla van Heel Merdanovic, Adviser for Gender Equality at the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), providing a snapshot of OSCE commitments related to women's political participation, major achievements and challenges, examples of good practice, and recommendations towards achieving gender equality in political and public life. It is based on country reports to the Beijing Platform for Action+25, data contained in various ODIHR Key Resources on Gender Equality and Women's Political Participation¹ as well as additional secondary sources. It was prepared upon request of UN Women and ahead of the sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 65), Expert Group Meeting on "Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls", to be held virtually from 5-8 October 2020. The paper does not represent official ODIHR's views and aims to serve as an expert-level background document for discussion.

In Moscow in 1991, the participating States recognized gender equality as a cornerstone of security and democracy in the OSCE region. Equal and meaningful political participation of women and men in decision-making is key to effective democratic institutions, good laws and policies, as well as long-term peace, stability, and the prosperity of OSCE participating States. Despite progress in improving equal rights, opportunities and outcomes for women and men, much remains to be done towards achieving gender equality in politics and decision-making in the OSCE region.

OSCE commitments call for gender balance among elected public officials at all levels of decision-making and across all branches of government, as well as for women's equal participation in political parties and electoral processes.² They also call on States to consider adopting legislative measures to improve gender balance, and to encourage shared work and parental responsibilities between women and men in order to facilitate women's political participation.³ Additionally, the 2004 OSCE Gender Action Plan tasks ODIHR specifically to "*assist participating States in developing effective measures to bring about the equal participation of women in democratic processes, [...] developing best practices for their implementation, [...] and monitor(ing) and report(ing) on women's participation in elections as part of its Election Observation Missions.*"⁴ The 2018 Ministerial Council Decision on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women acknowledges that "*women engaged in professional activities with public exposure [...] are likely to be exposed to specific forms of violence or abuse, threats, and harassment, in relation to their work*".⁵

As described in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, "*women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women ... a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account*".⁶ The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) further call for "*responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels,*" as well as *the social, economic and political inclusion of all.*"⁷

¹ ODIHR, [Key Resources on Gender Equality and Women's Political Participation](#).

² OSCE Ministerial Council [Decision 7/09 on Women's Participation in Political and Public Life](#), paras 1-3.

³ Ibid, para 9.

⁴ OSCE Ministerial Council [Decision 14/04 - 2004 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality](#), para 44(d).

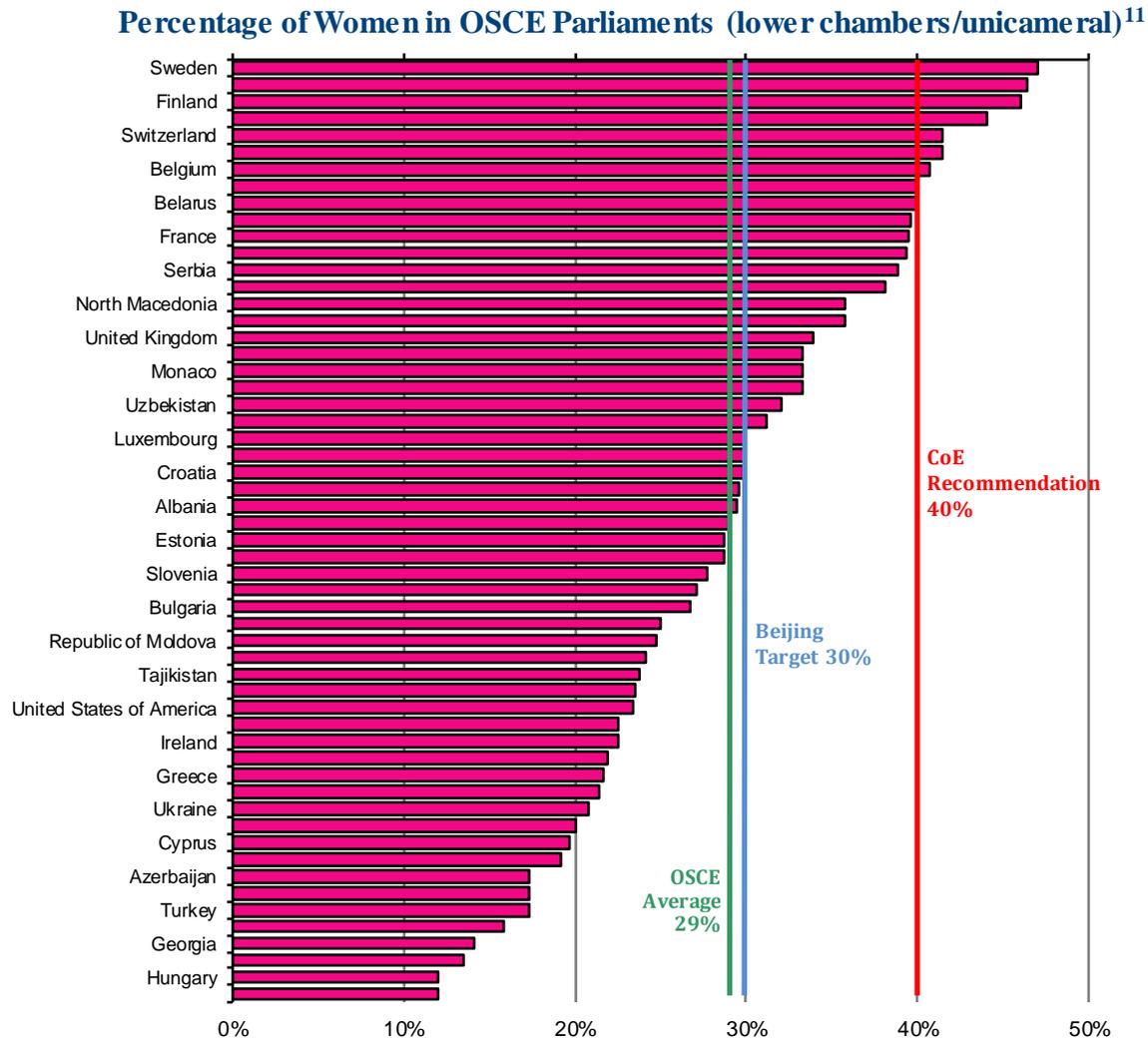
⁵ OSCE Ministerial Council [Decision on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women \(MC.DEC/4/18\)](#), Preamble.

⁶ [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#), 1995, para 181.

⁷ United Nations, Sustainable Development Goals, [target 10.2](#) and [target 16.7](#).

Achievements and challenges

Progress has been observed in women’s political participation across the OSCE region, particularly in legislative bodies. Women's representation in national parliaments increased to the current average of 29 percent in the OSCE region, up from around 11 percent when the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women took place in 1995.⁸ Almost half of the OSCE participating States (24 out of 57) have reached the 30 percent target established by the Beijing Platform for Action and the SDGs.⁹ The Council of Europe (CoE) recommends a minimum of 40 percent representation of either women or men in decision-making and only 10 OSCE participating States have reached this target.¹⁰



⁸ Inter-Parliamentary Union, [Percentage of Women in National Parliaments and archived data](#).

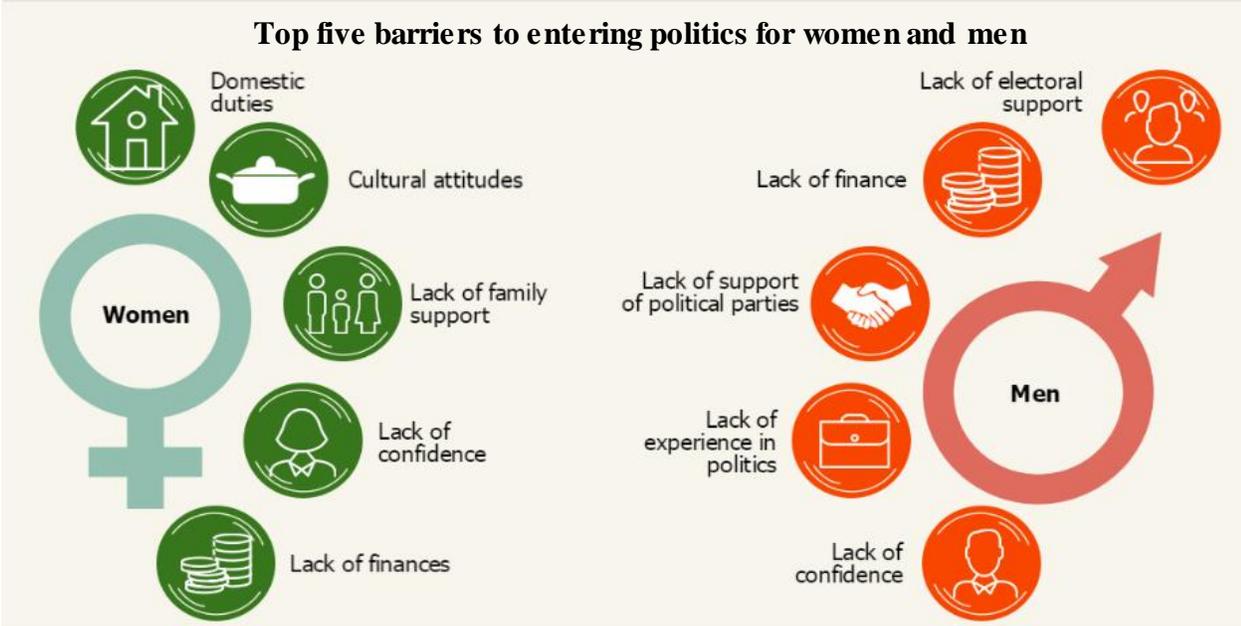
⁹ [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#), 1995, para 182.

¹⁰ Council of Europe Committee of Ministers [Recommendation 2003\(3\) on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision making](#).

¹¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union, [Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments](#), data as of 1 August 2020.

There is a wide variation in women’s representation in legislative bodies among the participating States, ranging from 47 percent to only 12 percent women parliamentarians in a few states. The Nordic countries lead the way in gender equality in politics with an average of 42 percent women parliamentarians. The achievements among the remaining sub-regions of the OSCE are fairly similar with 31 percent women parliamentarians in South Eastern Europe and in the European Union, 26 percent in North America, 25 percent in Eastern Europe, 24 percent in Central Asia, and 18 percent in the South Caucasus. Looking at parliamentary leadership, only 19 out of 78 parliaments (22 of which are bi-cameral) in the OSCE region are led by women speakers. With a few exceptions, women chair parliamentary committees mainly on topics that are traditionally perceived as women’s issues, such as family, education, social affairs, and culture.¹² Women from ethnic minorities and Roma and Sinti women in particular, remain severely under-represented in the European, national and regional parliaments, regional and municipal councils, governments and posts of responsibility in political parties.

Despite the existence of legal frameworks that ensure equality between women and men in most participating States, the political reality across the OSCE region differs. Caring responsibilities, unequal access to finance and a persistent pay gap, stereotypes and violence against women, lack of confidence and opportunity to experience formal politics, and male-dominated political structures all impede women’s abilities to enter, stay and lead in political and public life. The actual and perceived barriers to politics vary between women and men, influenced by cultural and political realities in societies, as shown below. These barriers are even more difficult to overcome for women from traditionally under-represented groups, such as women belonging to minorities, especially Roma and Sinti, young women, migrant women or women with disabilities.¹³



¹² ODIHR data as of March 2020 and ODIHR [Comparative Study of Structures for Women MPs in the OSCE Region](#), 2013.

¹³ ODIHR, [Compendium of Good Practices for Advancing Women’s Political Participation in the OSCE Region](#), 2016.

Participants in sub-regional consultations of the Beijing +25 Regional Review identified political parties as an important target for overcoming the persistent barriers to women's political advancement.¹⁴ ODIHR's gender audits of political parties demonstrate that candidacy selection procedures in political parties across the OSCE region remain non-transparent to the detriment of aspiring women candidates.¹⁵

Parliaments are increasingly aware of the need to integrate gender equality and diversity aspects in their institutions, both in terms of their representative, legislative and oversight functions as well as in terms of their role as public employers. Gender-sensitive legislation, for example, can ensure that laws work and deliver for women and men, boys and girls, in all their diversity.¹⁶

The implementation of temporary special measures has had a positive impact on women's political participation in the OSCE region, particularly legislative gender quotas designed to fast-track women's nomination and election to office. Almost 40 percent of OSCE participating States (22 out of 57) have introduced some form of legislative gender quotas in the last two decades. In the OSCE region, the quotas address national or local elected office, and in some cases both, with the prescribed percentage of women's representation ranging between 20 and 50 percent.¹⁷ Quotas differ in terms of prescribed placement provisions for candidate lists, which is the case in about half the OSCE states with quotas. The sanctions for non-compliance with quota provisions vary and can result in non-registration of candidate lists or financial penalties. Other States have opted for the introduction of financial incentives to encourage adherence with quota provisions.¹⁸ In terms of overall impact, the proportion of women elected to national parliament rose at a faster pace in those OSCE participating States that have legislative gender quotas compared with those without such measures.¹⁹ Still, the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms undermines the impact of legislative gender quotas. Furthermore, gains should not be attributed to quotas only, since other policy initiatives and cultural trends, such as voluntary party measures or measures to ensure good work/life balance, can also be effective in advancing gender equality in elected office.

With the #MeToo movement gaining traction in recent years, growing attention has been paid to violence against women in the public sphere.²⁰ Female politicians, artists, journalists and women's human rights defenders across the OSCE region are exposed to violence, reflecting the possible confluence of increased political polarity with the ongoing pervasiveness of misogyny. A recent study by the Council of Europe and Inter-Parliamentary Union found that 85.2 percent of the surveyed women parliamentarians suffered psychological violence while in office, with 46.9 percent receiving death threats or threats of rape or beating. Additionally, 58.2 percent were the target of online sexist attacks and 24.7 percent were subjected to sexual violence.²¹ Younger members of parliament and those working on gender equality issues reported they were often singled out. Many of the surveyed women underscored the absence of a mechanism or service to which they could direct complaints or seek support.

¹⁴ OSCE *Internal Report Mapping Beijing +25 Implementation and OSCE Commitments*.

¹⁵ ODIHR, *Handbook on Promoting Women's Participation in Political Parties*, Warsaw, 2014.

¹⁶ ODIHR, *Making Laws Work for Women and Men: A Practical Guide to Gender-Sensitive Legislation*, Warsaw, 2017.

¹⁷ International IDEA, *Gender Quotas Database*.

¹⁸ ODIHR, *Gender Equality in Elected Office: A Six-Step Action Plan*, Warsaw, 2011, p. 8 and International IDEA, *Gender Quotas Database*.

¹⁹ ODIHR, *Gender Equality in Elected Office: A Six-Step Action Plan*, Warsaw, 2011, p 54.

²⁰ According to the Council of Europe's *Istanbul Convention*, "violence against women" is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life," Istanbul, 2011, art 3. a.

²¹ Council of Europe and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe*, 2018.

The current Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates the continued under-representation of women in decision-making. A significant gender disparity is found in the composition of Covid-19 taskforces in the OSCE region.²² Women may be better represented in public health and advisory groups, but their representation is low in roles of political decision-making.²³ Failure to integrate gender aspects in crisis planning and response is likely to exacerbate existing gender inequalities and result in policies unable to respond to the needs of diverse groups of women and men. In turn, it is concerning that only a few participating States report conducting gender impact assessments to guide gender sensitive Covid-19 policies.²⁴

Good practices for advancing women to politics

ODIHR has been leading the OSCE's efforts to advance women's political participation by supporting institutional change, awareness-raising, capacity-building and knowledge-sharing. Over the last decade, ODIHR has implemented projects and activities, provided expert support, and developed knowledge tools for improving women's political participation in 40 OSCE States. Emphasis was placed on gender equality in parliaments and political parties as well as capacity building of women leaders, including from marginalized groups such as Roma and Sinti, young women and women with disabilities.²⁵ Since low levels of women's representation in politics are often a consequence of an uneven playing field during elections, ODIHR's election observation missions examine women's participation as voters, candidates and elected representatives, making recommendations for improvement of electoral laws and practices.²⁶

Institutional change: Promoting gender-sensitive and inclusive parliaments

Across the OSCE region, the legitimacy of representative democracy is facing challenges that are fuelled by a growing public perception of parliaments as being corrupt, elitist, and male-dominated.²⁷ ODIHR and OSCE Field Operations, working together, supported the parliaments of Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia in their efforts to become more gender-sensitive and enact laws that recognize the different needs and priorities and are therefore effective for both women and men. Consultations and assessments of the current level of gender sensitivity in parliamentary and legislative processes were followed by workshops for parliamentarians, based on ODIHR's publication "Making Laws Work for Women and Men: A Practical Guide to Gender-Sensitive Legislation".²⁸ This has resulted in state-of-the-art gender action plans developed for these legislatures. Upon request by participating States, ODIHR also reviews draft and existing legislation to assess its compliance with OSCE commitments, gender equality standards and international good practice and publishes its legal opinions on Legislationline.org.

While gender parity has not yet been achieved in most parliaments in the OSCE region, women do manage to have a significant impact on political landscapes and decision-making. Women's caucuses in parliaments are initiated by women parliamentarians, aiming to promote solidarity, strengthen capacities, and advance women's policy interests.²⁹ Over the last decade, ODIHR and OSCE field operations have

²² ODIHR, [OSCE Human Dimension Commitments and State Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic](#), 2020.

²³ For instance, the Covid-19 taskforce of the United States and Italy did not initially include any women. Hungary's taskforce included one woman out of 15 task force members. For an overview of different countries' task forces, see [here](#).

²⁴ Based on the information published by the [Council of Europe](#), only Serbia and Sweden initially reported to be conducting gender impact assessments.

²⁵ ODIHR, [Guidelines on Promoting the Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities](#), Warsaw, 2019.

²⁶ ODIHR, [Gender Equality and Women's Rights: A Factsheet](#), Warsaw, 2017.

²⁷ Transparency International, [People and Corruption: Citizen's Voices From Around The World](#), 2017; Pew Research Center, [Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy](#), 2017; and Inter-Parliamentary Union, [Women in Parliament](#).

²⁸ ODIHR, [Making Laws Work for Women and Men: A Practical Guide to Gender-Sensitive Legislation](#), Warsaw, 2017.

²⁹ ODIHR, [Comparative Study of Structures for Women MPs in the OSCE Region](#), 2013, p. 6.

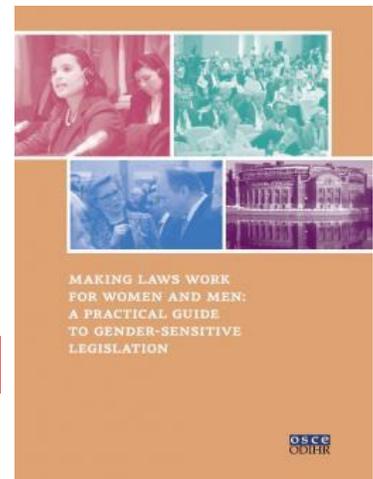
supported the establishment and work of parliamentary women’s caucuses in a dozen States, including Albania, Belarus, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, North Macedonia, Poland, Serbia and Ukraine. Targeted and collaborative efforts between women inside and outside parliament, often under the leadership of parliamentary women’s caucuses, have resulted in several laws and policies on gender equality, domestic violence, family or social affairs and similar issues.

Good practice: Gender action plans for parliaments

Gender action plans for parliaments represent a new era in democratic governance and parliamentary processes. These strategic documents aim to foster institutional change towards gender equality, inclusion and efficiency in parliaments’ representative, legislative and oversight roles and in leadership processes, as well as parliaments as gender-sensitive public employers. In the long run, such plans can lead to inclusive and efficient parliaments, delivering good laws, policies, services, and jobs for women and men in all their diversity.

Knowledge tool: Gender-Sensitive Legislation

ODIHR’s publication *Making Laws Work for Women and Men: A Practical Guide to Gender-Sensitive Legislation* provides a step-by-step guide for parliamentarians and parliamentary staff on how to implement gender-sensitive legislation, explaining what it is, why it is important, and how it can be integrated into routine parliamentary work.



Collective Awareness Raisins: Working with political parties on gender equality

Political parties are considered to be gatekeepers of democracy. OSCE commitments “encourage all political actors to promote equal participation of women and men in political parties...to achieve better gender-balanced representation...at all levels of decision-making.”³⁰ Engaging with political parties on concrete measures to advance gender issues facilitates women’s access to candidate nominations and elected office, but also benefits the parties themselves. By diversifying the composition of a political party, party’s support base and outreach to voters and potential candidates can be widened. In turn, gender mainstreaming in political parties can be a win-win situation. ODIHR has developed the Gender Audit for Political Parties - an online self-assessment tool- for parties to identify gender gaps and opportunities.

To date, ODIHR and OSCE field operations have supported gender audits of 48 political parties in Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Tajikistan. The 400 recommendations issued by ODIHR were used by political parties to develop gender action plans, important strategic documents to increase women’s participation in parties and sensitize internal party

Good practice: Gender Audit of Political Parties

The Gender Audit of Political Party is a self-assessment tool that enables a party to identify both strengths and shortcomings in its gender equality approach. The audit findings will point to the activities that a party can undertake to mainstream gender equality in party structures, programmes, and documents. This process can be used by party leaders and activists for the development of gender action plans, to outline measures for institutionalizing gender equality and women’s empowerment in the party and beyond.

³⁰ OSCE Ministerial Council Decision 7/09 on Women’s Participation in Political and Public Life, Art 3.

policies and procedures. Examples of implementation of gender action plans include the establishment of local women's councils or advocating for the introduction of voluntary party quotas for women candidates.



Recommendations

Gender equality in political and public life is not only required to improve the representative nature, accountability and quality of democracies, but it also has a profound impact on the way politics is done in terms of policy-making agendas and political content.³¹ To achieve gender equality in political and public life, the following actions are needed:

- **Discriminatory laws and policies should be identified and remedied**, ensuring that all laws and policies are gender-sensitive. Consideration should be given to introducing and improving legislative measures or financial incentives to achieve gender parity in politics. **Political participation of diverse and under-represented groups of women** should be ensured.
- **Institutional change** should be promoted, ensuring that democratic institutions are systemically inclusive, representative, and gender-sensitive at all levels. Parliaments should mainstream gender aspects in their representative, legislative and oversight functions, and ensure that they are gender-sensitive public employers. Structures enabling women to influence policy and legislative agendas, such as parliamentary women's caucuses or women's organizations, should be strengthened.
- **Equal participation of women and men in political parties should be promoted**, ensuring gender-balanced representation at all levels of decision-making.³² Political parties should conduct self-assessments on gender equality in their structures, to strengthen internal party democracy, institutionalize gender equality, and support women's empowerment in the party and politics broadly.
- **Support mechanisms for (aspiring) women politicians should be created** to reduce the burden of unpaid and domestic work, and foster their role in politics. Adequate complaint and support mechanisms should be created to prevent and combat all forms of violence against women, including in political and public life and online.
- **Women leaders** should be supported, by strengthening their skills, capacities, and confidence for politics and facilitating their access to knowledge and networking. Raising the awareness of men leaders and **engaging men** in advancing gender equality (in politics) is crucial for future progress.
- **Women's organizations**, women human rights defenders, and gender equality advocates should be supported in their important work, as they play a key role in ensuring that women's needs, priorities, and voices are heard and considered in decision-making processes that affects them.

³¹ ODIHR, [Compendium of Good Practices for Advancing Women's Political Participation in the OSCE Region](#), 2016, p. 82.

³² OSCE Ministerial Council [Decision 7/09 on Women's Participation in Political and Public Life](#), Art. 3.