

WORKING PAPER

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: A GLOBAL ANALYSIS



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UN WOMEN

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GOVERNANCE AND PARTICIPATION SECTION

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a global data-based analysis of women's representation in local government, use of legislated quotas and types of electoral systems in local elections, contributing to a more comprehensive view of women's political participation and a shift in the global narrative from national to local decision-making power, a less known but critical level of governance. Women's rights to equal political participation at all levels of government are recognized in international normative frameworks,² emphasized in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action,³ and endorsed, decades later, in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The importance of equal political participation at *all levels* of government is clear in the wording of SDG target 5.5 – “ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life” – and the choice of indicators for monitoring progress in achieving this target.⁴ Two indicators on women's representation in decision-making in political life are included: the SDG indicator 5.5.1a on women's representation in parliaments – previously included in the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) monitoring framework – and the SDG indicator 5.5.1b, a new indicator on women's representation in local government.

The new SDG indicator, focused on local decision-making power, expands research and global data on women's political representation beyond national legislatures. The past three decades have focused on parliaments as countries' highest legislative bodies with powers to craft and change national legislation and oversee national budgets. The relatively

few women and men members of parliaments are counted and captured globally in SDG indicator 5.5.1a, on a regular basis, by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Year after year, the numbers collected by IPU tell the story of the considerable underrepresentation of women in legislative bodies and the slow and uneven progress in improving their participation over time. The story of women's representation among the millions of local government members, however, remains largely untold. Despite some country case studies and regional initiatives, global data and research on this level of government has been scant, resulting in a major knowledge gap.

The addition of the indicator 5.5.1b to the global SDG monitoring framework recognizes the importance of a whole-of-government approach and of women's voices and leadership at the local level in achieving the SDGs. Local government is the result of the 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 population groups 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 roles as local leaders in ensuring sustainable development. Indeed, research indicates that women in local decision-making positions redefine local priorities by being more inclusive,⁵ prioritizing family-friendly policies and measures,⁶ and, in some contexts, by contributing to increased gender equality in terms of income, employment and parental leave.⁷

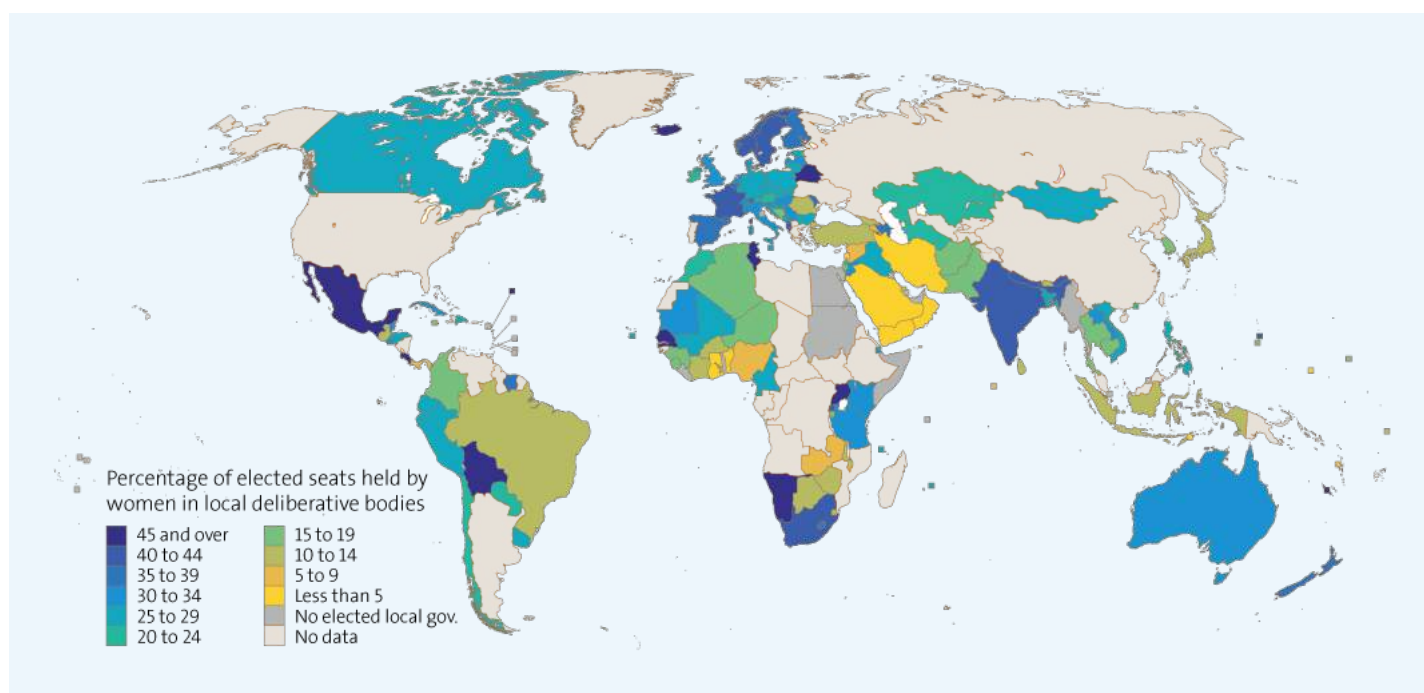
This paper presents global data and data-based analysis on women's representation in local government by UN Women as the sole custodian agency for SDG indicator 5.5.1b. Nominated as such in 2016, UN Women finalized its methodology in 2017 and started compiling data from countries in 2018. As per its methodology,⁸ the indicator is measured as the proportion of elected seats held by women in deliberative bodies of local government such as local councils or assemblies. The data used are official data on elections results produced by 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 paper employs data on the most recent local election results as of 1 January 2020, available for 133 countries and areas (Map 1).

The analysis indicates that women's representation in deliberative bodies of local government is higher

than in parliament, but still not on equal terms with men. Indeed, very few countries have reached gender balance in local decision-making bodies; in the majority of countries, women's underrepresentation is severe. Legislated gender quotas have a significant positive impact on women's representation in local government, particularly in countries in Africa and Asia, 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 the local level; however, in the absence of quotas, their impact is less significant. Finally, the paper 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 elected local deliberative bodies, as of 1 January 2020



Note: The designations employed and the presentation of material on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UN Women concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

Source: UN Women (2020a). Women in Local Government Database. Data compilation on SDG indicator 5.5.1b.

Available at <https://localgov.unwomen.org>.

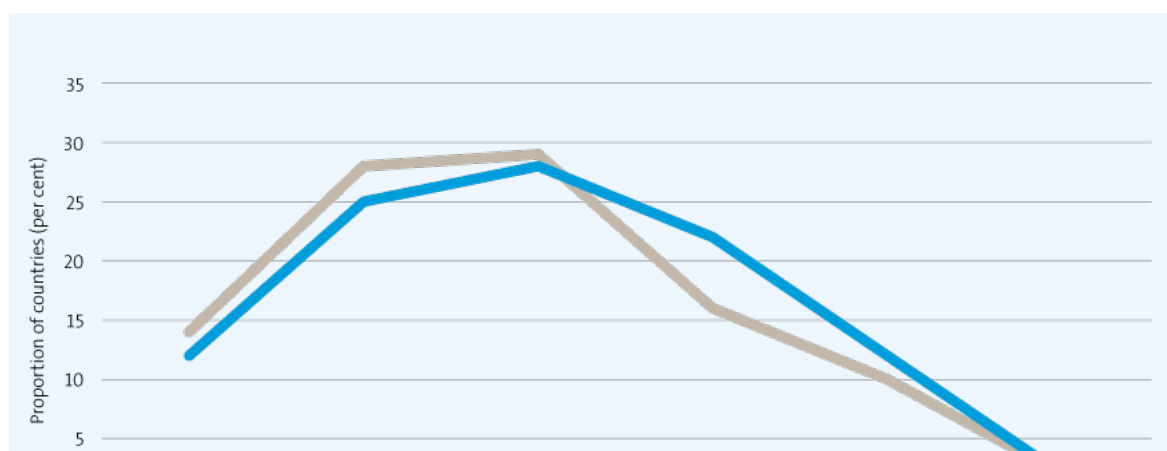
II. WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Women's representation in local deliberative bodies is higher than in parliaments, 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 of 1 January 2020 – only 2.18 million (36 per cent) are women. This places women's representation in local government higher than in national parliaments (25 per cent), but not yet close to parity. Only

20 countries (representing 15 per cent of countries with data) have reached over 40 per cent women in local decision-making bodies and an additional 28 countries have women's representation between 30 and 40 per cent (Map 1). In the majority of countries with data, however, women are severely underrepresented. Seventy countries fall between 10 and 30 per cent women's representation, and 15 countries have less than 10 per cent women's representation, a distribution that is similar to the one observed for parliaments (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
Percentage distribution of countries by level of women's representation in local deliberative bodies and parliaments, as of 1 January 2020



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