



Bringing equality into public life: Trends and perspectives for participation and decision-making in a new development context

Regional civil society consultations

FINAL STATEMENT

On the occasion of the sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women on 15–26 March 2021 under the priority theme of ‘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,’ – we, civil society organizations (CSOs) involved in promoting gender equality across Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Republic of Moldova, Romania and Ukraine decided to organize a regional consultation on this issue and send our messages and expectations to the Commission and to national governments.

The consultations were organized by the Institutum Virtutes Civilis public association and hosted on 11 March 2021 by the Government of the Republic of Moldova, with support from the UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia. The general aim of the regional consultation was two-fold: to take stock of progress on women’s political participation, economic empowerment, and on the elimination of all forms of violence against girls and women, and to agree on key priorities that need to be addressed to enable women to enjoy their rights and equal opportunities and to contribute to decision-making.

Over 60 participants stressed that gender equality is essential for the democratic development of modern societies. It is neither correct nor fair that the experience, skills, needs and concerns of women are inadequately represented in decision-making processes. Driven by this idea, the participants in the event have all contributed to the identification of problems, challenges and potential solutions. Most of them agreed that some progress has been made, including in regards to the participation of women in democratic exercises. However, resistance to this progress has also gained traction – a trend that is worrying but predictable at the same time, considering that the current structures and institutions would much rather keep the status quo intact.

It is worth mentioning that gender dimensions have been given little priority on the agendas of most governments in the region but through the efforts of civil society, some local leaders, and the efforts of the international community, it has risen on their list of priorities. Nonetheless, the issue of women’s empowerment is not even close to being emphasized adequately. Despite that, the following achievements should be mentioned:

- Women’s representation in parliaments from the region has been rising over the past 25 years. However, this rise has amounted to a still unsatisfactory level, of 23 per cent.
- Gender quotas have been implemented by many countries in the region and represent a critical first step in achieving equal representation.

- In the past decade, we have seen some women candidates ascending to the highest offices, a sign that societies are ready to support women in politics.
- The participation rate of women in local elections has been rising, especially for mayoral and local council positions.
- The majority of countries whose representatives participated in consultations, have elaborated national action plans for the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.
- All participating countries have made progress on putting in place a progressive national legislative and policy framework aimed at protecting women's rights and promoting gender equality.

The participants equally mentioned challenges to implementing the gender agenda across the region:

- **Violence and aggressive attitudes against women involved in politics** are increasing, and as a result, in some countries such as the Ukraine, the number of women elected to local councils has decreased. Another example is the Republic of Moldova, which during the 2020 presidential election registered a series of violent acts directed towards the female contender, most of them based on gender stereotypes and sexist ideas.
- **Women's interest in getting involved in political processes is diminished** by a lack of support and assistance from political parties. In many instances, CSOs constitute the main support that women candidates receive in preparation for electoral campaigns.
- **Legislation on prevention/response to discrimination, sexual harassment and violence against women** exists but is not implemented, mainly for two reasons: 1) limited awareness among the population about legal remedies; and 2) lacking or limited capacities of existing mechanisms to recognize and act upon such cases.
- **Weak law enforcement mechanisms to support women's political participation** keep the progress too slow to achieve gender parity in decision-making processes.
- **Gender quotas have proven to be insufficiently effective** if legal frameworks do not establish clear rules that mandate political parties to place women on an equal footing with men in eligible places on the list of candidates.
- **The implementation of reforms at the national level without taking into account gender aspects worsens the situation of women** and limits their access to decision-making processes.
- **National legal frameworks do not establish mechanisms to punish and discourage violence against women candidates.** A large proportion of women candidates have resigned from electoral races due to acts of violence, including physical violence, as well as online, or technologically facilitated, harassment. In some instances, female candidates that have won a mandate did not wish to run for a second term due to the violence directed against them.
- **Anti-gender movements have gained traction** in several countries and seem to be very well organized and funded. These movements employed several targeting practices that have generated more division within societies. CSOs in Ukraine monitored the elections and also carried out an analysis of the [Anti-Gender Movement](#), which was well-organized and had funding from sources from outside the country. It targeted people of different ages, and young people in particular. In the Republic of Moldova, with support from UN Women, CSOs have established a new tool for reporting cases of violence against women in public life. [The Gender Monitor Platform](#) was activated in the summer of 2020 and in 1.5 months, it has already collected 145 claims. Several cases were filed at the Council for Preventing and Eliminating

Discrimination and Ensuring Equality and it issued one ruling against the former President of Moldova for sexist speech against the current President during the presidential campaign.

- **Society has a strong stereotyped mindset** that governs the distribution of power and how priorities are set.
- **There is a lack of knowledge** within society itself but also within the bodies that should be monitoring the use of violence and sexist speech. Even if legislation prohibiting sexist speech and violence exists, there is an enormous problem with how this legislation is being enforced.
- **Gender equality policies are not effectively implemented at all levels.** For example, at the local level (community or district), gender policies are lacking.
- **The number of women running independently is increasing**, since political parties do not encourage women to participate in elections. Moreover, when selecting candidates for certain constituencies, women are usually promoted in small constituencies or where their party is less likely to win.
- **There are cases when women parliamentarians are not vocal enough** to promote the interests of women in their country, and parliaments are not sufficiently gender-sensitive to play a more important role in monitoring the implementation of national gender policies.
- **The efforts of mass media are not focused on removing gender stereotypes** and their coverage continues to disproportionately reflect the work of male politicians. There is an information gap regarding the participation of women in politics that has been observed among countries of the region. It is hard to track women candidates and their activity based on the information available to the public.

Forum participants also recommended that the following measures be undertaken at national and regional levels:

- **Enhance the role of national parliaments** in promoting gender equality, by taking a proactive approach to strengthening parliamentary oversight over the implementation of legislation and policies on gender equality and women's empowerment.
- **Support the development of women parliamentarian caucuses** and offer them sufficient instruments to strengthen parliamentary oversight of the respect of women's social, economic and political rights.
- **Continue to offer support to elected women at all levels**, through: a) mentorship; b) changing the existing social structure; c) connecting with community members – increased consultations and engagement of women and men from communities. Women's CSOs, gender movements and the international community should continue supporting the capacity-development of women in politics and women candidates, and further strengthen cooperation with the women's section of political parties.
- **Develop specific national legislation** governing the behaviour and communications of candidates during election campaigns, and establish clear intervention measures in cases of violence against women candidates.
- **Gender mainstream all public policies**, including complex reforms to facilitate the equitable and efficient involvement of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels. Provide sufficient funding for the implementation of gender policies at all levels of governance.
- **Advocate with political parties and electoral committees** for quotas, norms and standards for women's political participation, and ensure their enforcement. In this context, a number of priorities need to be considered: a) bridging the research gap – there is only informal evidence that women politicians face harassment and violence

from their peers in political parties; b) documenting good examples or common standards among women leaders across party lines, to push back against discrimination and violent discourse on gender quality; c) engaging more men from political parties to challenge toxic masculinity.

- **Emphasize the role of men**, not only in advancing gender equality but especially in eliminating violence against women, sexism and the sexist speech that women face.
- **Establish financial support mechanisms for political parties** that are promoting meaningful women participation in decision-making at all levels.
- **Enhance women's economic empowerment**, offering them more chances to make independent decisions and to participate actively.
- **Conduct broad-based and targeted campaigns for society at large** on: a) eliminating gender stereotypes with regards women's engagement in politics and women's leadership and decision-making in public office; b) addressing sexism, sexist speech and violence against women in public life and introducing normative frameworks that prevent and prohibit this. The messaging of such campaigns is crucial and must emphasize the nexus between equality and equity in political participation, women's economic empowerment and sustainable development.
- **Collect data on violence against women in political and public life**, including against gender activists, to inform policies and raise awareness, as well as to ensure State action on punishing violence against women in the public sphere.
- **Conduct gender audits** to keep track of the performance of political parties and a range of public institutions, thus identifying gender gaps and addressing them promptly. The gender audit of political parties can be proposed as tool to set baselines and develop standards and common principles on eliminating violence against women in public life.
- **Support CSOs in continuing working with society at large** – not only in explaining the issues of violence against women, sexism and sexist speech but also the legal provisions in place that can help prevent this phenomenon.
- **Enhance cooperation between CSOs and public bodies, including political parties**, by involving them in all national and local structures for monitoring the implementation of gender policies. CSOs should continue to monitor and evaluate progress that has been made while public authorities should integrate their conclusions to better allocate resources where they are needed most.
- **Conduct targeted advocacy with specific groups**, such as young women and men who embrace the gender equality agenda, to: a) act as role models and influencers for gender equality and zero tolerance towards violence against women in public life; b) raise awareness of women's sexual and reproductive rights and the need for comprehensive sexual education (formal and informal) based on UNESCO standards, so as to eliminate existing stereotypes, misconceptions and misinformation on women's reproductive rights. Lack of awareness, knowledge and comprehensive education on sexual reproductive rights, combined with the patriarchal power matrix, can lead to gender-based violence at all levels, including against women engaged in public life.
- **Monitor gender elements of electoral platforms** of all candidates for public office.
- **Enhance regional cooperation** and support the development of regional networks and platforms to exchange experiences and best practices in promoting women's rights. CSOs, networks of elected women and women's sections of political parties need more platforms to communicate common challenges and share knowledge on eliminating violence against women in public spaces. One approach can be to create an informal online platform – as a continuation of this consultation meeting – or through partnership projects, for example, with the European Union and Eastern Partnership Countries.