SUPPORT TO ELECTORAL REFORMS
ПОДДРШКА НА ИЗБОРНИ РЕФОРМИ
MBËSHTETJE E REFORMAVE ZGJEDHORE

A STUDY OF
**WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION
IN POLITICAL PROCESSES**
IN NORTH MACEDONIA

A **MIXED PICTURE** FOR

GENDER EQUALITY IN THE CONTEXT

OF THE 2021 LOCAL ELECTIONS

Twenty years have passed since the introduction of a gender quota in North Macedonia's legal framework for elections. In these decades, more than twenty elections have been held, with the most recent being the local elections of October 2021.

In spite of numerous efforts and initiatives to increase the participation of women in the country's electoral processes and to promote gender equality in society as a whole, including the introduction of the gender quota in 2002, the persistently low participation of women in electoral and political processes in North Macedonia remains one of the greatest obstacles to achieving gender equality and genuine democracy.

This overview presents the key findings of a new empirical study on the limitations to women's participation in electoral and political processes in North Macedonia. The study was undertaken within the framework of Support to Electoral Reforms in North Macedonia, a project of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) implemented by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES).

The study collected and analyzed quantitative and qualitative data from a public survey and focus group discussions on the perspectives of citizens, women politicians, and media representatives regarding women in politics. The findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study are presented below in the form of excerpts from the expert analysis.

The views, opinions and content expressed in this overview do not necessarily reflect those of the donor, the project, or the implementer.

Survey Findings

Interest in local politics and prevailing beliefs and perspectives regarding women in politics

Female respondents express slightly less interest in local politics (**43%**) than male respondents (**48%**).

Only 56 percent of citizens express an interest in women's issues and women's political participation in local and national elections (**63%** of female and **49%** of male citizens).

89% **80%**

Citizens **believe in g**uaranteed equality between women and men as citizens

88% **84%**

Citizens **believe in e**qual opportunities for women and men

77% **67%**

Citizens **believe in f**orty percent participation for women in all levels of government

72% **62%**

Citizens **believe in e**lections with candidate lists that comply with the gender quota, i.e. with four candidates of one sex and six candidates of another sex
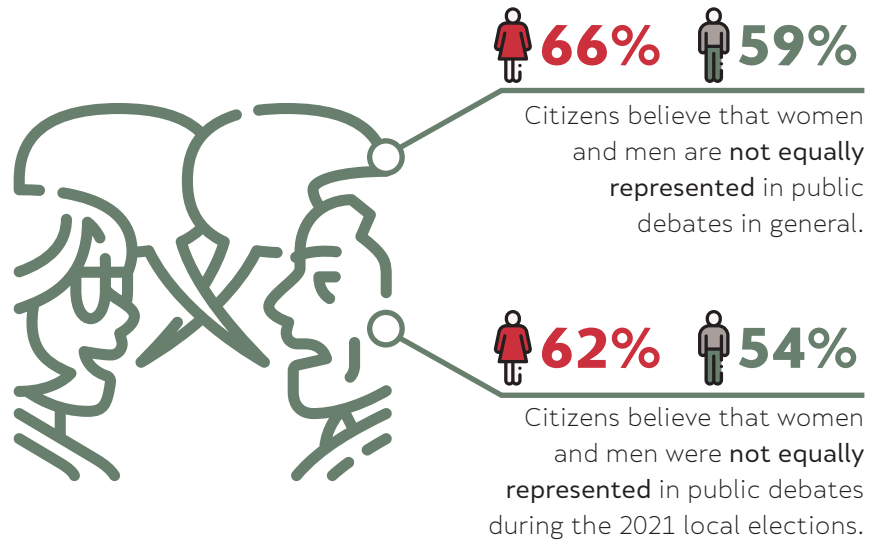
At local level, the most famous/recognized women are those active in:

- Politics (politicians, party activists, party members): **20%**
- Local government (municipal councilors, candidates for councilor): **19%**
- Health sector (doctors and dentists): **16%**

Whereas **68%** of female respondents agreed that higher expectations were placed on female public figures, only **47%** of male respondents agreed this was the case.

The respondents identify the following factors as the main barriers to women's effective participation in electoral process:

- The dual burden on women resulting from their disproportionate share of domestic work and childbearing (**43%**)
- Traditional gender roles, stereotypes, and discriminatory attitudes and norms (**41%**)
- Lack of party support and exclusion from party decision-making structures (**38%**)

66% **59%**

Citizens believe that women and men are **not equally represented** in public debates in general.

62% **54%**

Citizens believe that women and men were **not equally represented** in public debates during the 2021 local elections.

Levels of awareness of the presence of women in electoral and political processes
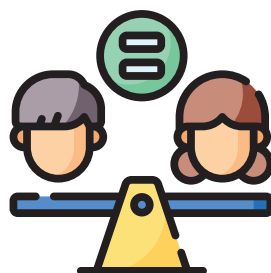
When asked whether more women candidates had participated in the 2021 local elections than in previous elections, **34% of male respondents** agreed whereas **60% of female respondents** said the number had not increased.

Three out of 10 citizens report being aware of women heading a party's candidate list in their municipal elections.

Half of the interviewed citizens say that less than five of 81 mayors elected in each consecutive elections were women.

The majority of respondents identify the following factors as pre-conditions for increasing the extent and quality of women's representation in politics:
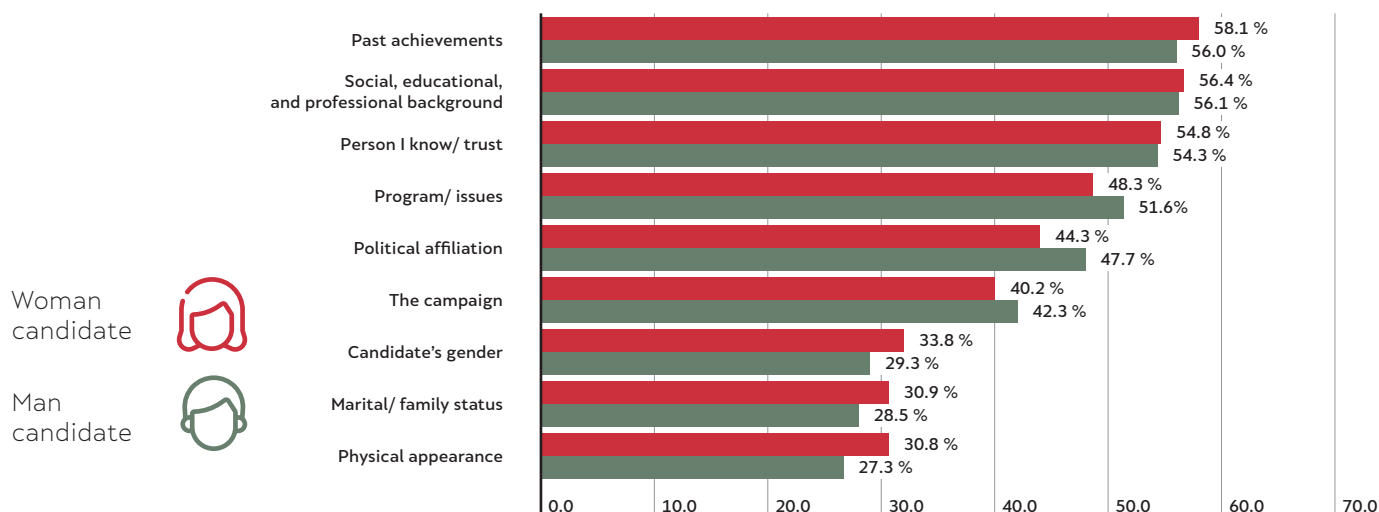
- A change of mentality (**78%**)
- Substantial efforts by political parties to include more women in their party (**70%**)
- Training and mentoring programs offered to women (**62%**)

When asked whether they would choose a male or female candidate for mayor if presented with a choice of two otherwise equally appealing candidates, **65%** of female respondents and only **22%** of male respondents said they would choose the women candidate.

The adverse effects of gender stereotypes on citizens' perceptions of women participating in public life and of women leaders

The main criteria applied by citizens in voting for men and women candidates are:

Criteria	Woman candidate	Man candidate
Past achievements	58.1 %	56.0 %
Social, educational, and professional background	56.4 %	56.1 %
Person I know/ trust	54.8 %	54.3 %
Program/ issues	48.3 %	51.6 %
Political affiliation	44.3 %	47.7 %
The campaign	40.2 %	42.3 %
Candidate's gender	33.8 %	29.3 %
Marital/ family status	30.9 %	28.5 %
Physical appearance	30.8 %	27.3 %

Woman candidate

Man candidate

Focus Group Findings

General perceptions of women in politics in North Macedonia

According to the focus group participants, including women candidates, party members and elected women politicians, the increasing number of women on candidate lists is solely the result of the law requiring 40 percent participation for women. While the political parties largely comply with this quota, they rarely place women at the head of candidate lists.

Reasons for the insufficient number of women in politics

- Male domination in politics
- Traditional gender roles in the household
- Stereotypes and prejudices related to women
- Hate speech in the media.

Selection of women for candidate lists

- The key driver for women to become candidates for local councilors is the attractiveness of the party program, especially in relation to gender issues and the involvement of women in party decision-making.
- The main support for women's candidacies are women's forums of political parties, other party members, family members and partners.
- The main challenges encountered by women candidates are "the politics and calculations of the party leadership" and male domination of the final selection and ordering of the candidate lists.

Levels of support for the presence of women in electoral and political processes

✓ If women are candidates for a mayor or on a council list, **50 percent of female citizens** would vote for that political party, as opposed to only **25 percent of male citizens**.

✓ While **79 percent of female respondents** are in favor of increasing the space for women in politics at local level, **one in three male respondents** are opposed.

✓ The main reason cited by citizens for supporting increasing space for women in politics was the "need for gender equality, equal rights, and the advancement of democracy" **(19%)**.

Only three percent said they supported this because "women are more honest and transparent", "brave and fighters", or because "women have better vision and ideas and are more creative and innovative".
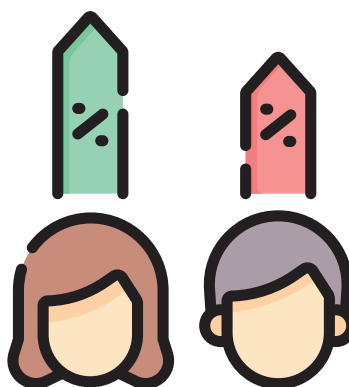
The most important reasons cited for not supporting increasing space for women in politics were the opinions that "politics is for men, not for women" (**16%**), that women "would not have time for their family and household chores" (**13%**) and that "men are more capable, more active, more stable and more decisive" (**11%**)

Experiences from the campaign

- Main activities undertaken by women candidates: direct meetings with citizens (door to door); giving out flyers and promotional material; press conferences
- Main support: colleagues from the party and women's forums of political parties; partners and family members; training in public speaking and in communications with journalists
- Challenges: hate speech on social networks regarding the physical appearance of women candidates; lack of training for public appearances and media relations
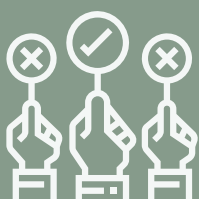
What would you do differently if you had to run for elections again?
☑ "BE BRAVER AND MORE AMBITIOUS"
☑ "BE MORE SPECIFIC AND CLEARER IN VOICING DEMANDS"
☑ "HAVE GREATER SELF-CONFIDENCE AND BE LESS SELF-CRITICAL"

Media and gender issues

- There is a need for greater control over online media and web portals where a lower level of accountability has been observed
- There is no equality and fairness in the way men and women are portrayed as political candidates in the media
- Women are easy targets in the media and their political careers are vulnerable to hate speech that directly attacks their morals and dignity
- Hate speech on media and social networks has greatly discouraged women from engaging publicly and actively in politics, often leading them to abandon their political careers
- All of the above factors contribute to the unequal representation of women in public debates in election campaigns

Conclusions and Recommendations

General: Women in politics

The political under-representation of women in North Macedonia and the lack of an adequate enabling environment to support their exertion of substantive political influence remain important challenges, contributing significantly to gender inequality throughout society.

Although there is "solidarity among women" in society, this does not result in women voting for women candidates. And while there is public recognition and awareness of women's lack of access to leadership positions in all domains of society, this does not translate into male support for the use of gender quotas as a mechanism for enabling better access for women to leadership positions. Indeed, there is significant resistance to gender quotas among men.

Gender stereotypes and bias influence the selection of candidates by parties and their ordering of women on candidate lists for councilors and nominations of candidates for mayoral elections. Such stereotypes also influence voters' choices in elections, reflecting the unfair portrayal of women politicians in the media. This unfairness extends to a media focus on the marital status and physical appearance of women candidates instead of their political views and proposals.

Electoral Reform and the Legal Framework

There is evidence of considerable public support for women's political representation, especially as mayors. However, this support and demand have not been not responded to satisfactorily by political parties.

> This evidence-based fact should be highlighted as a means to initiate revisions of the electoral system, including internal party democracy, to increase the number of women elected as mayors.

In the system of closed lists applied in local elections for electing municipal councilors in North Macedonia, it is the political parties which determine the ranking order of candidates on the electoral ballot, while the voters can only endorse or reject the entire list without any possibility of changing the order in which the seats are allocated to the candidates.

> Provisions should be introduced in the Electoral Code to ensure balanced gender representation among the heads of candidate lists.
>
> A "zipper system" should be introduced whereby parties alternate between women and men on their candidate lists, thus achieving fairer and more proportional representation.

The current lack of regulation of political communications and lack of accountability for hate speech and/or discriminatory language on social networks, particularly during election campaigns, translates directly into a higher level of vulnerability of women candidates to negative public exposure.

> Consideration should be given to ways of improving the regulation of online political activities, and sanctioning defamation and hate speech during election campaigns.

Political Parties

Although political parties sign codes of conduct ahead of election campaigns, in practice they typically fail to address cases of misconduct towards women on the part of their own members or to protect women candidates from hate speech.

> All political parties should adopt or improve their existing formal codes of conduct to ensure more effective regulation of the behavior of party members, including misconduct towards women. All codes of conduct should include details of the procedure and sanctions to be applied in cases of misconduct.

The data gathered from the study survey and focus group discussions confirms the widespread perception that women politicians in North Macedonia do not have sufficient support from their own political parties. In particular, women face barriers in the form of lack of support from male-dominated party-leadership that determine the internal rules of parties, widespread gender-based bias in party practices, and higher expectations on women in public office.

> Meaningful efforts are needed to foster greater gender equality in political parties in North Macedonia, including continuous advocacy for better political representation of women in the decision-making structures of political parties. Encouraging the involvement of male party members in these efforts could be important to achieve equal opportunities for women in parties.
>
> Women politicians themselves need to learn how to gain, retain and expand political capital. This entails developing skills in public speaking and digital communications. Political parties must provide the necessary support to women candidates and elected representatives to acquire these skills, including by encouraging them to speak in public debates and by providing or supporting training in the use of information and communication technologies.

Electoral Administration

The gender composition of the State Election Commission, as the highest election management body in North Macedonia does not comply with the legal provisions requiring gender representation of at least 30% of the under-represented sex.

> The process of nominating State Election Commissioners must comply with the Electoral Code and the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men and its provisions regarding equal opportunity and gender representation.

The research and analysis undertaken for this study indicates that the SEC should increase its institutional commitment to mainstreaming gender in its structures and activities, including with regards to its insufficient provision of sex-disaggregated data related to women's participation in political and electoral processes.

> The SEC and other relevant stakeholders involved in the administration of elections should undertake all necessary efforts to provide sex-disaggregated data relating to all stages of the electoral process.
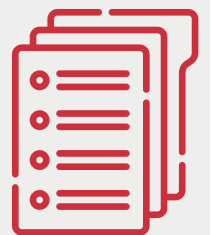
This study confirms that a 40 percent gender quota for candidate lists does not necessarily result in a 40 percent representation of women on the municipal councils.

The SEC could revise its instruction on achieving a 40 percent gender quota for candidate lists to further enhance opportunities for women to be elected as councilors.

The SEC's latest strategic plan and gender action plan provide the strategic and long-term planning needed to build institutional commitment to gender equality.

The activities foreseen in the SEC's gender action plan must be fully implemented. These should include targeted training in gender-awareness for management and staff, as well as efforts to ensure the SEC provides sufficient sex-disaggregated data on all aspects of the electoral processes.

The SEC should consider developing strategies and engaging in partnerships to enable the additional dissemination of sex-disaggregated electoral data beyond the publication of such data on its website.

Media

Women in North Macedonia are engaged in an uneven struggle for equal opportunities and equal participation in political and electoral processes.

Efforts should be made to support the proposals of media practitioners reported in this study for mainstreaming gender equality in editorial policies and for establishing human resource mechanisms to monitor and promote the advancement of women in politics in the media.
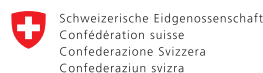
The Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, as the main media regulatory body in North Macedonia, is committed to documenting and confronting patterns and instances of stereotypical portrayals of women in the media environment.

The Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services' capacity should be further strengthened to monitor local election campaigns and to conduct targeted training in gender awareness for journalists.

Greater efforts should be made by all responsible state bodies to monitor online media more effectively, both in general and specifically with regard to online media campaigns during national and local elections.

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