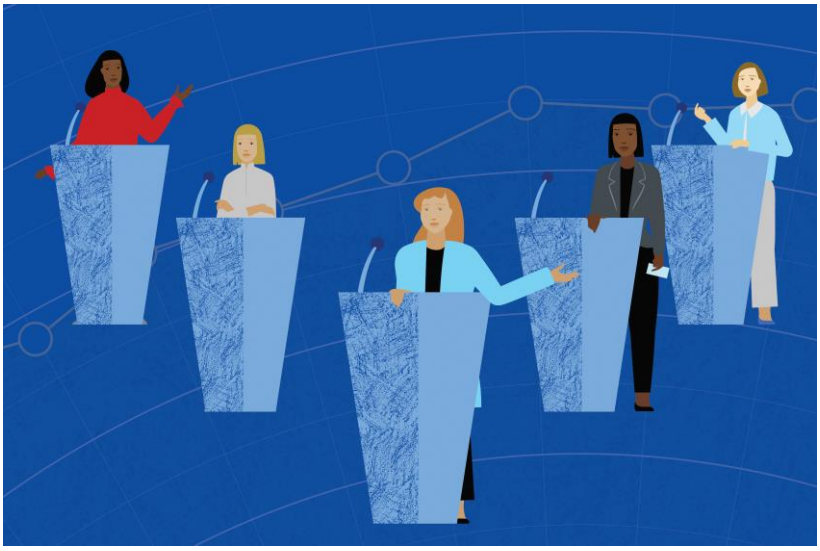
Data story: The Road to Parity – Tracking Women's Political Representation



HIGHLIGHTS

→ Despite progress made in recent years towards more **gender balance in political representation**, this goal has not been reached yet.

→ Multidimensional indices and scoreboards are useful to keep track of progress and setbacks, and identify areas for improvement. The **Composite Indicators and Scoreboards Explorer Tool** provides an overview of these measures in one place, allowing holistic analysis and insights.

→ The analysis of the global **Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Index** shows that progress has been slow and no country is likely to achieve gender equality by 2030, the target year for the achievement of SDGs.

→ However, the SDG Index also illustrates how trends at the country level can move substantially towards or away from gender parity over a short period of time. Positive stories stem from a number of countries where gender parity has been advanced with political commitment, targets and different quota systems.

→ The analysis of the situation in the EU using the **Gender Equality Strategy Monitoring Portal** shows moderate progress in achieving gender balance in national parliaments, and a slower trend in local/municipal councils. Significant country differences persist in women's representation in politics across the EU.

→ The **association between women's political representation and quality of government** is one example of how more equal representation contributes to more diverse perspectives in policymaking and a stronger democracy that better reflects the society.

CONTEXT

SDG 5 aims to "*achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*" by 2030. Its targets include ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. The year 2024 was pivotal for women's representation with the European Parliament election and people heading to the polls in 72 countries[1], affecting half of the world's population.

Despite progress made in recent years towards more equal representation in politics, this goal has not been reached yet. According to the **International Parliamentary Union (IPU)**, as of 1st January 2024 the percentage of women in national parliaments stood at 26.9% (compared to 24.3% in 2019).[2] A preliminary analysis of some of the major elections in 2024 shows that many countries actually witnessed decreasing shares of female members of parliaments, or only small wins and staggered progress. Looking towards the future, **what more can we learn using a series of multidimensional measures that track women's political representation?**

THE POLITICAL POWER DIMENSION OF GENDER EQUALITY

Gender data is necessary for tracking progress. Indices and scoreboards can provide a rich snapshot of where countries and subnational entities stand in terms of equality. Additionally, they can be used to track and monitor countries' progress on achieving objectives. Several measures of gender equality include a domain dedicated to gender equality in power, including political power.

This brief describes how the political power dimension of gender equality is reflected in a number of existing indices and scoreboards and what can we learn from them at a global, EU and local level.[3] The **Composite Indicators and Scoreboards Explorer** includes a range of these measures (**Figure 1**).[4]

For example, the **SDG Gender Index** and the **Global Gender Gap Index** measure progress on gender equality worldwide. The **Gender Equality Strategy Monitoring Portal** and the **Gender Equality Index** focus on the EU region. The **Gender Social Norms Index** quantifies societal biases against women by analysing attitudes toward women's societal roles across countries worldwide (see **Box 1** for more details).

The existing measures capture women's participation in the political sphere but **representation does not necessarily always equal to actual political power**. Thus, representation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for women's political empowerment. As shown by the Social Norms Index scores (**Figure 1**), which skew more to lower values than other indices, attitudes and biases may present obstacles even for women already elected for office.

THE BIG PICTURE

In this section, we focus on the **SDG Gender Index**,[5] which provides a big picture of where the world stands on gender equality as embedded in the 2030 Agenda. It is a multidimensional index measuring progress on gender equality in 139 countries across five world regions. A score from 0 to 100 is assigned to each country on 56 gender issues in 14 out of the 17 SDGs. The latest edition of the index was published in September 2024.

Understanding the overall gender equality gaps of a country can be helpful as they influence the scope of women's representation in political life. At the same time, women's representation matters for the broader progress in equality. The 2024 SDG Gender Index shows that **progress has been slow** since the outset of the Sustainable Development Goals (**Figure 2**). In 2022, the world achieved a score of 66.1/100, a slight increase from 2015 (63.7/100). While the Index captures a wide range of gender issues – political empowerment is one that could have an outsized impact quickening the pace of change on the global state of gender equality.

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[1] https://www.undp.org/super-year-elections

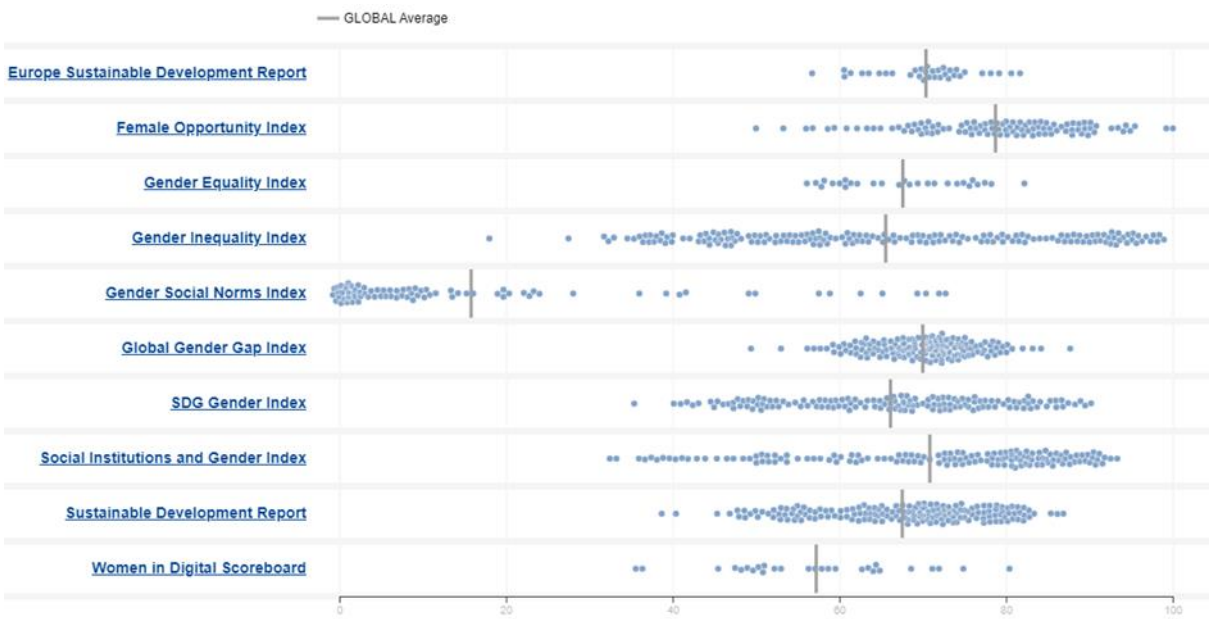
[2] https://data.ipu.org/women-averages/?date_month=1&date_year=2024

[3] It should be noted that different terms and definitions are used to refer to equal representation in different organisations and contexts. Some entities, like Equal Measures 2030 uses the term 'gender parity' to refer to a value that falls within the range of 45-55% gender representation. The European Commission often uses the term 'gender balance' to usually refer to the target of ensuring the representation of at least 40% of the underrepresented sex (see for instance the 2023 Report on Gender Equality in the EU, and the Directive on Gender Balance on Corporate Boards).

[4] https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/explorer

[5] https://equalmeasures2030.org/2024-sdg-gender-index

Figure 1 – An overview of Gender Equality Indices



Source: Composite Indicators & Scoreboards Explorer, 2024. | Note: The figure shows selected indices (including their scores) available in the Explorer tool under the category 'UN Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality'. Geographic locations, identified by the dots on the right hand side of the figure, may be defined differently across indices. For comparison purposes, some indices have been rescaled into 0-100 scores, where a higher score always reflects a better performance. The marker for the GLOBAL average is based on the scores available for each index.

Box 1: A closer look at selected gender equality measures

The **SDG Gender Index** is the most comprehensive tool to measure progress towards gender equality by 2030. It benchmarks gender equality across 139 countries and 56 issues across 14 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. It includes power related indicators, such as women in parliament and ministerial roles. The index is developed by the Equal Measures 2030 coalition.

The **Gender Equality Strategy Monitoring Portal** is developed by the European Commission to allow policy makers, researchers, and stakeholders assess progress on the policy objectives of the EU Gender Equality Strategy, identify strengths and opportunities and follow developments over time. The data is aligned to the three main dimensions of the Strategy: free from violence and stereotypes, thriving in gender-equal economy, and leading equally throughout society.

The **Gender Equality Index** measures progress of gender equality in the EU through a set of dimensions: work, time, money, power, knowledge, and health. It gives visibility to areas that need improvement and ultimately supports policy makers to design more effective gender equality measures. The Index is developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE).

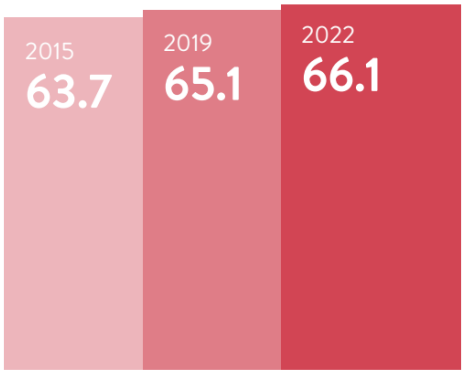
The **Global Gender Gap Index** is introduced by the World Economic Forum as a framework for capturing the magnitude of gender-based disparities and tracking their progress over time. National gender gaps are benchmarked on economic, education, health and political criteria.

The **Gender Social Norms Index** measures how social beliefs obstruct gender equality in areas like politics, work, and education. Its latest release includes data from 80 countries and territories based on information from the World Values Survey. The Index is produced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Source: https://equalmeasures2030.org/2024-sdg-gender-index; https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/ges-monitor; https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2023; https://www.weforum.org/publications/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality; https://hdr.undp.org/content/2023-gender-social-norms-index-gsni#/indicies/GSNI

On average, the world is improving at a slow pace and no country is likely to achieve gender equality by 2030, the target year for the achievement of SDGs.

Figure 2 – SDG Gender Index global score, 2015, 2019 and 2022



Source: Equal Measures 2030 | Note: A score of 100 denotes achievement of gender equality targets in the SDGs.

Global data (**Figure 3**) show that 2022 data on women's representation in politics, while still far from gender parity, has been improving since 2015. This improvement is led by Europe and North America with 32% of Parliament seats and Latin America and the Caribbean with 30% of senior government positions. The regions lagging behind are the Middle East and North Africa and Asia and the Pacific.

While global and regional averages show more stable upward trends – at the country level, trends can move quickly and substantially towards or away from gender parity. **Figure 4** focuses on the three countries that made the most progress in the share of women in ministerial roles since 2015 compared to the three countries that showed the greatest backsliding. In some of these countries, change in the appointment of women to senior government posts have also reflected changes in the share of women elected to parliament:

- New political commitments in **Ethiopia** increased the share of women in parliament, especially since the 2018 election where gender parity was achieved in the president's cabinet and also led to greater parity in Parliamentary seats.
- Gender parity targets improved women's representation in **Australia** but only for some political parties. When seats were allocated proportionally to the number of votes there was more progress towards gender parity. Nevertheless, women's share in senior government improved.
- **Bolivia's** quota system has led to improved women's political representation, but also led to political violence where women have been targeted, which could be related to the downturn of women in senior government posts.

BIG STEPS, SMALL STEPS: PROGRESS IN THE EU

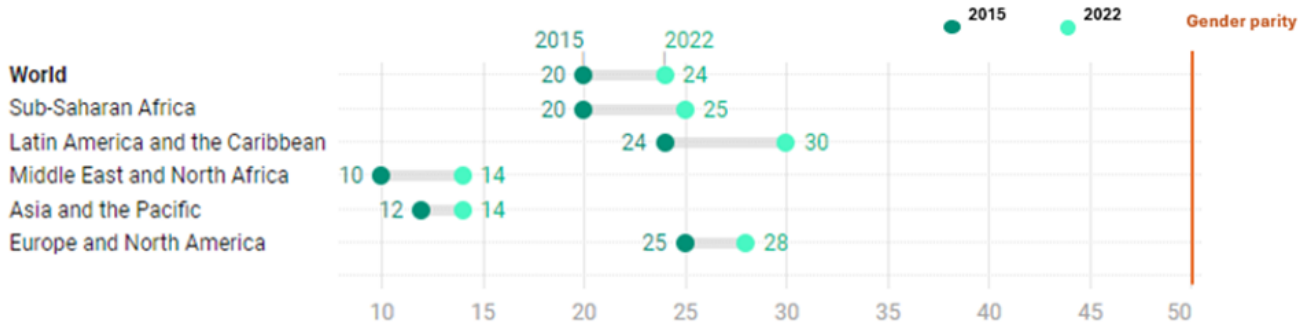
Europe is often ranked as one of the best performing world regions when it comes to equal representation in political decision-making. However, a closer look at individual countries can reveal significant differences. How does the EU monitor progress across its Member States? The European Commission's Gender Equality strategy 2020-2025 includes the goal of improving gender balance in decision-making and politics. To monitor progress, the **Gender Equality Strategy Monitoring Portal** brings together a richness of data aligned to the three pillars of the Strategy. The data provided in the Portal covers women's representation in politics across all levels, from the supranational to local governance. This section provides highlights from the Monitoring Portal.

Within the EU, there has been some progress towards achieving gender balance at **national level**, partially attributed to the introduction of legislative quotas. The percentage of women's representation in national parliaments increased between 2010 and 2023 by an average of 8.7 percentage points across the region (**Figure 5**). In 2010, only Sweden had reached gender balance above 40%, while an additional five EU Member States (Belgium, Denmark, Spain, Austria and Finland) achieved this goal by 2023.

Progress at **local level** has been slower and more uneven. Over a period of more than a decade (2011-2023), the share of women in local and municipal councils only increased by an average of 4.0 percentage points throughout the EU (**Figure 6**). In 2023, gender balance above 40% was reached in Spain (40.9%), France (42.2%), Sweden (43.1%) and Finland (40.1%). Yet, large cross-country differences exist. For instance, the share of women in local/municipal councils in Germany stood only at 23.9% in 2023.

Figure 3 – Share (%) of women in parliament and senior government posts by region, 2015 and 2022

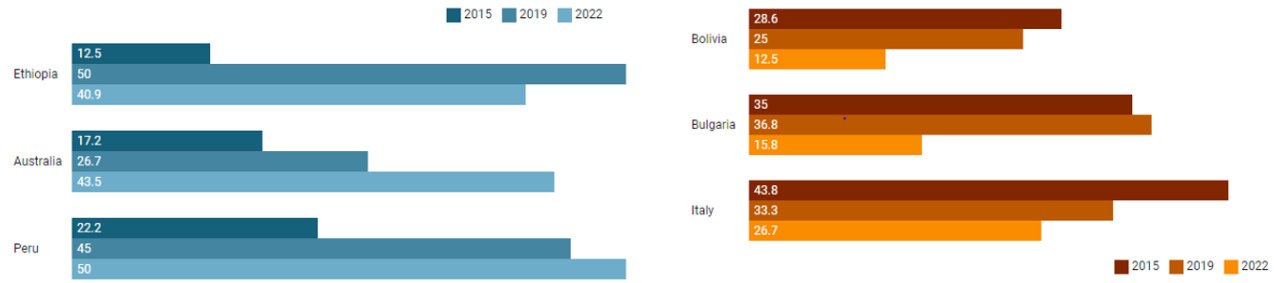
(a) Parliament



(b) Senior government posts

Source: Equal Measures 2030 calculations based on IPU.

Figure 4 – The share of women in ministerial roles that have increased or declined the most from 2015 to 2022



Source: Equal Measures 2030 and IPU.

NOT ONLY A MATTER OF FAIRNESS AND EQUALITY

Achieving gender parity in political decision-making would not only better reflect the population and be more just. Governments that are more diverse also make better decisions, and women often lead on important human rights, gender equality, and social protection policy portfolios[6], help promote collaboration and increase productivity[7].

A short **analysis of regional measures** can help to illustrate the association between women's political representation and quality of government, for instance. **Figure 7** plots scores of the European Regional Quality of Government index (EU-EQI, x-axis)

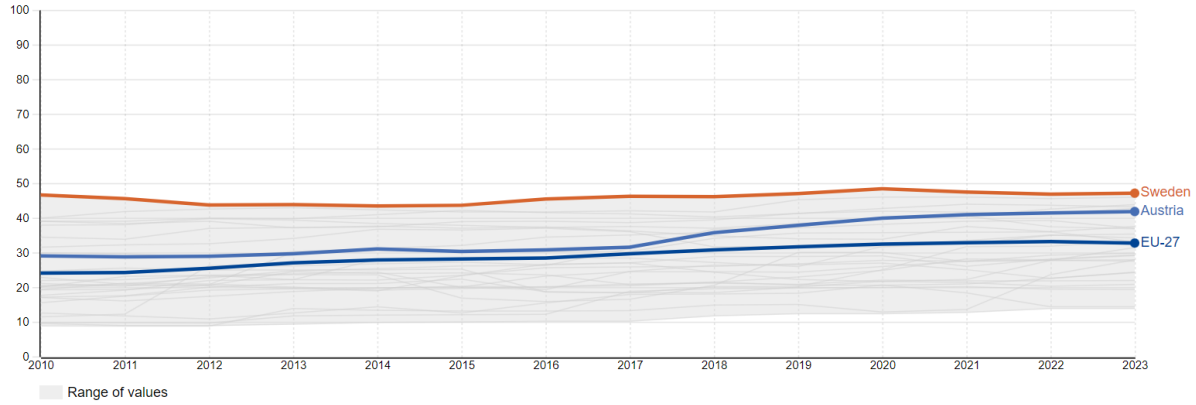
[6] Little, T.H.; Dunn, D., & Deen, R.E. (2008). A view from the top. Gender differences in legislative priorities among state legislative leaders. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J014v22n04_02

[7] American Psychological Association (2024). https://www.apa.org/topics/women-girls/female-leaders-make-work-better

– which measures perceptions and experiences with public sector corruption, along with impartial allocation and quality of public sector services, and the political power sub-domain of the Female Advantage Index (FemAI – Power, y-axis) – which measures the level of female achievement in political representation compared to the best regional female performance. The FemAI is a useful addition to the measures on women's political power as it focuses on the relative regional position and specifically on advantages that women face.

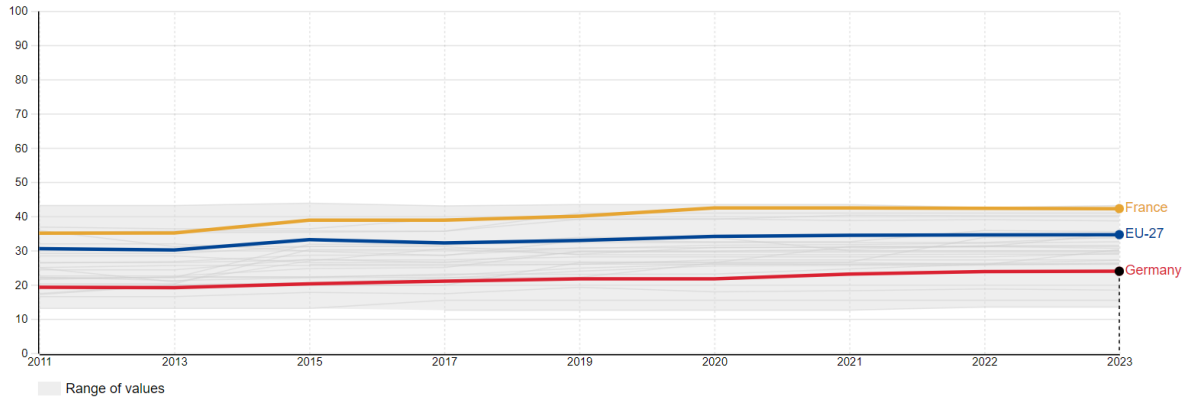
The analysis shows a **strong and positive association between the measures**. Regions that perform well in the power dimension of the FemAI, i.e. that have moved further along the path toward gender balance in political representation, are also those that have a better quality of government institutions, and vice versa. Whereas correlations cannot capture the direction of cause and effect, it is likely that the influence runs both ways. For example, it may be that women achieve more in regions with better quality of governance, and that having more women in power increases the quality of governance.

Figure 5 – Time line: Share of women members of national parliaments (both houses), EU 2010 to 2023



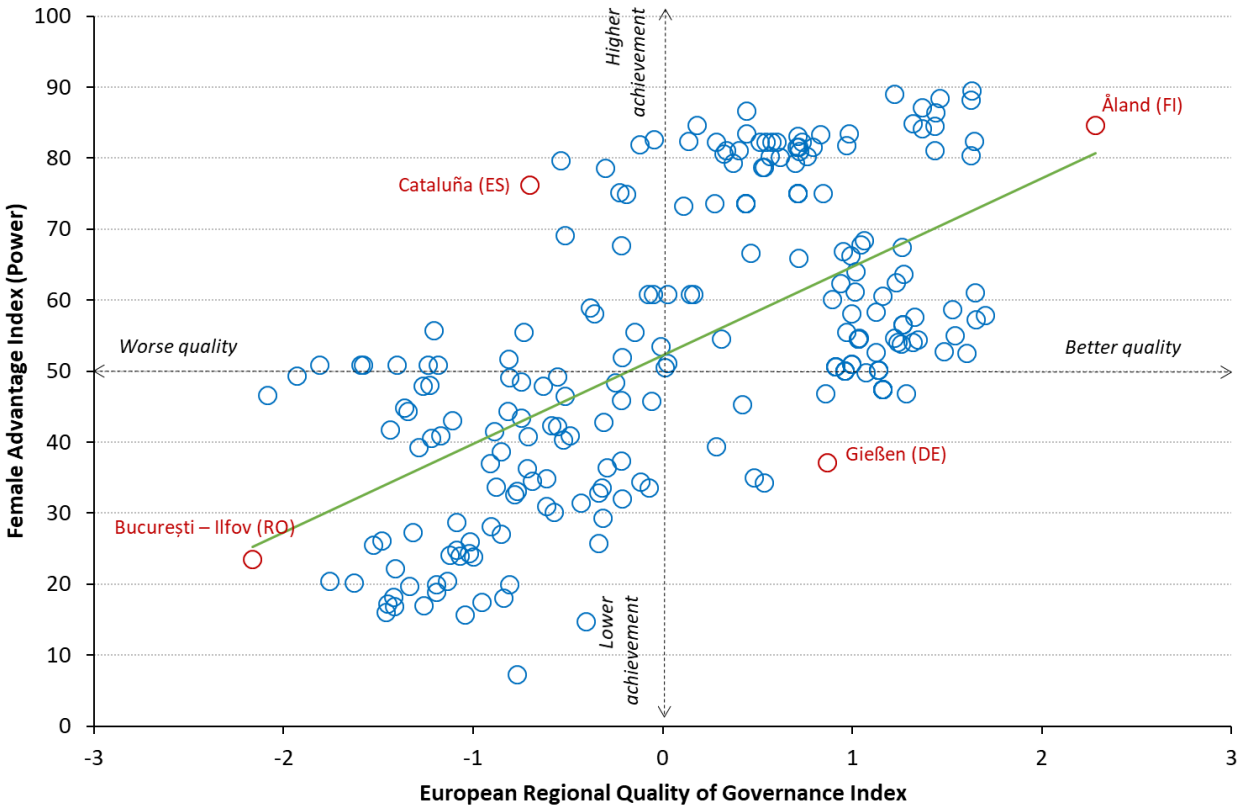
Source: Composite Indicators & Scoreboards Explorer, 2024.

Figure 6 – Time line: Share of women members of local/municipal councils, EU 2011 to 2023



Source: Composite Indicators & Scoreboards Explorer, 2024.

Figure 7 – Relationship between the power dimension of FemAI and EU-EQI at EU regional level



Source: JRC elaboration. | Note: The FemAI (Power) varies between 0 (lower achievement) and 100 (higher achievement). The EU-EQI is expressed in z-scores, so the EU average is equal to zero. The green line shows the linear and positive relationship between the FemAI and the EU EQI. The correlation coefficient between the two indices is equal to 0.61. The Explorer Tool allows to discover the interlinkages between different indicator frameworks through a correlation matrix and scatterplot. Find more information at https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/explorer/synergies.

CONCLUSION

The year 2024 opened a window of opportunity to increase women's political representation with a series of elections around the globe. Yet, it seems that the road to parity remains long and rocky. Meanwhile, indices and scoreboards remain essential to keep track of progress and setbacks, as well as to identify areas for improvement at different levels.

Generally, these measures present a coherent narrative. With slow and uneven progress, the world remains far from achieving gender equality in the political sphere as a whole. Yet, several countries can provide lessons learnt and inspiration for future progress, and change can also happen relatively quickly when the right commitment and targets are in place. Furthermore, these tools reveal that the benefits of gender-balanced political representation extend beyond fairness and equity. They contribute to more inclusive governance, diverse perspectives in policymaking, and a stronger democracy that better reflects the society.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

Minna.Nurminen@ec.europa.eu

EU Science Hub — joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu

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