



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
21 December 2020

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-fifth session

15–26 March 2021

Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

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

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report contains an examination of global trends, persistent barriers and opportunities with regard to 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. Progress made in women’s representation at different levels, mainly through legislated gender quotas, and the impact of women’s participation in decision-making and civil society, are acknowledged in the report. Systemic challenges, especially the increasing levels of violence perpetrated against women in public life and certain enduring harmful norms, require urgent attention, as do specific challenges encountered by marginalized women who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. States can facilitate a more inclusive and enabling environment in which all women could participate in public life through more ambitious targets, increased political will, sustainable financing and gender-responsive institutional arrangements. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has compounded challenges to decision-making, and, while women have rarely been included in decision-making on COVID-19 response efforts in equal numbers to men, in several countries where they have been in leadership positions, the response to the pandemic has been particularly effective. The report concludes with recommendations for consideration by the Commission on the Status of Women.

* E/CN.6/2021/1.



I. Introduction

1. In accordance with its multi-year programme of work (2021–2024), the sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women in 2021 will consider, as its priority theme, 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. The present report anchors the theme in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Political Rights of Women, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other international agreements.

2. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action emphasizes the need to address inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and highlights women's equal access to and full participation in decision-making as a critical strategy for achieving equality for women and girls. It also emphasizes that all people have an equal right to participate in their country's government through public office and informal leadership. The importance of women's participation in executive, legislative, judicial and public administrative decision-making, as well as in civil society through women's groups, networks and community-based organizations, is underlined. The present report focuses on women's participation and leadership in these areas, while acknowledging that women's leadership in public life can help support their empowerment in other sectors, including in the arts, culture, sports, media, the private sector and finance, as well as in multilateral institutions.

3. Despite women's increased engagement in public life, equality is far off. Women remain significantly underrepresented in all aspects of decision-making, and violence against women in public life is widespread. Men with power often resist women's leadership, even within political parties. Women's higher levels of poverty, more limited access to finance, greater share of care duties, and challenges faced in realizing their sexual and reproductive health and rights, combined with exclusionary institutional rules and procedures, limit their full participation. The attitude that women should not have public roles, enduring norms about gender roles and legal discrimination compound these challenges and devalue women's contributions to decision-making, threatening sustainable development. Organized opposition to women in public life is sometimes strong and violent, with the situation worsened by democratic backsliding, increased social and political polarization and deepening inequality.

4. To reach equality in participation and decision-making in public life, it is necessary to implement international and national commitments and norms, including through temporary special measures, create more enabling environments and institutional systems, reduce violence against women in political life and strengthen the voices of women, who face multiple forms of discrimination.

5. Good governance and democracy require inclusive leadership and representation. While men and women are equally responsible for achieving gender equality, a larger number of women in office can influence gender-responsive public policies and institutional practices. Women have a right to be equally represented and consulted in decision-making. Younger women, in particular, have been increasingly vocal on a range of issues of international significance, such as climate change, poverty and racism. Women's participation diversifies the life experiences drawn on by policymakers and provides a platform for expressing priorities based on common, gendered lived experiences.

6. The quality, relevance and effectiveness of policymaking and policy implementation increases when power is shared, as recently shown by the critical roles that women have played in responses to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19)

pandemic. Women's organizations are at the forefront of community responses in many countries but struggle because of diminishing funding, increased demands for services, restricted movement and shrinking civic space. The pandemic is rolling back the limited progress made in the past 25 years with regard to women's empowerment and gender equality, and measures to increase women's leadership in COVID-19 response and recovery efforts are urgently needed.

7. Women's equal participation and leadership, as well as the elimination of violence, is essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Target 5.5 of the Goals, on ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life, is connected to target 16.7, on ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels. The current pace of progress is too slow and failure to expedite women's participation will make it impossible to achieve the Goals. The central importance of women's leadership to gender equality and women's empowerment is underscored in many of the agreed conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women.

8. The present report draws on recommendations of the expert group meeting on the priority theme, convened virtually by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) from 5 to 8 October 2020. The report also relies on recent research and data from United Nations entities and other sources.

II. Women are incrementally entering public life but progress is too slow

9. There has been progress in the increase in the number of women elected or appointed to decision-making positions, but full gender parity is far from being reached, and women rarely hold leadership positions in executive and legislative offices. Gaps remain because of persisting structural constraints and barriers that reinforce discriminatory norms, practices and policies. Political will to change power relations in accordance with international commitments with regard to gender equality is lacking. Inequalities, conflict, violence against women, climate change and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are compounding existing obstacles to women's participation, especially for women facing multiple forms of discrimination and young women.

Women's participation in executive offices

10. The highest level of power remains the furthest from achieving gender parity. Women serve as Heads of State or Government in only 21 countries (10 women Heads of State and 13 women Heads of Government), while 119 countries have never had a woman leader. At the current rate, parity at the pinnacle of power will not be reached for another 130 years.¹ Available research demonstrates that women's and men's education, political experience and ages upon entering executive office are similar. Gendered perceptions that executive offices should be filled by men, and not on the basis of credentials, account for women's severe underrepresentation at this level.²

11. Globally, women hold 21 per cent of ministerial positions, five points higher than in 2010 (see figure I). Just 14 countries have cabinets with 50 per cent or more positions held by women. In 16 countries, 40 to 49.9 per cent of ministers are women, but in 40 cabinets, fewer than 10 per cent of ministers are women, and in 54 cabinets

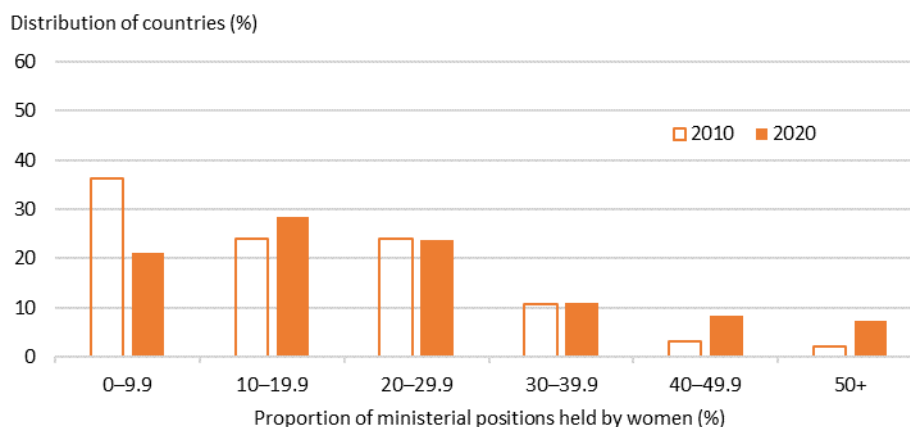
¹ Based on calculations of UN-Women data, as at 1 November 2020. Only elected Heads of Government have been considered.

² Farida Jalalzai, *Shattered, Cracked, or Firmly Intact? Women and the Executive Glass Ceiling Worldwide* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016).

women account for between 10 and 19.9 per cent of ministers. At an annual increase of just 0.52 percentage points, gender parity in ministerial positions will not be achieved before 2077.³ Increasingly, women lead ministries in non-social sectors, such as defence, the environment, employment and trade/industry.⁴

Figure I

Percentage distribution of women in ministerial positions, 2010 and 2020



Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UN-Women, “Women in politics: 2010 – situation on 1 January 2010”, 2010, and “Women in politics: 2020 – situation on 1 January 2020”, 2020.

12. Some leaders have demonstrated political commitment to women’s equal roles by appointing 50/50 cabinets; some have also committed to diversity in their cabinets to help reverse discrimination based on age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, migration status, disability and other personal characteristics. In the United Nations, in line with the system-wide strategy on gender parity launched in 2017, gender parity of resident coordinators was achieved in 2018, and of Assistant Secretaries-General and Under-Secretaries-General was achieved in 2020. Gender balance would be achieved more quickly if more leaders show the political will to set and meet parity targets for all executive positions at all levels of government.

Women’s representation in national and local legislatures

13. The proportion of women in parliament has doubled globally since 1995, but men still hold 75 per cent of seats. Although the primary role of national parliaments is to represent the voices of all people in decision-making, women’s representation has grown on average from only 12 per cent in 1995 to 25 per cent in 2020. At that rate, gender parity in national legislative bodies will not be achieved until 2063.⁵

14. A few countries have made significant progress since 2000 (see figure II). In four countries, there are 50 per cent or more women in parliament than men, and in 24 countries, the figure stands at over 40 per cent. Most of those parliaments are in Europe, Africa or Latin America and the Caribbean. In 109 countries, however, between 10 and 29.9 per cent of members of parliament are women, and in 27 countries, women account for less than 10 per cent of parliamentarians.⁶ Just one in five national parliamentary speakers is a woman.

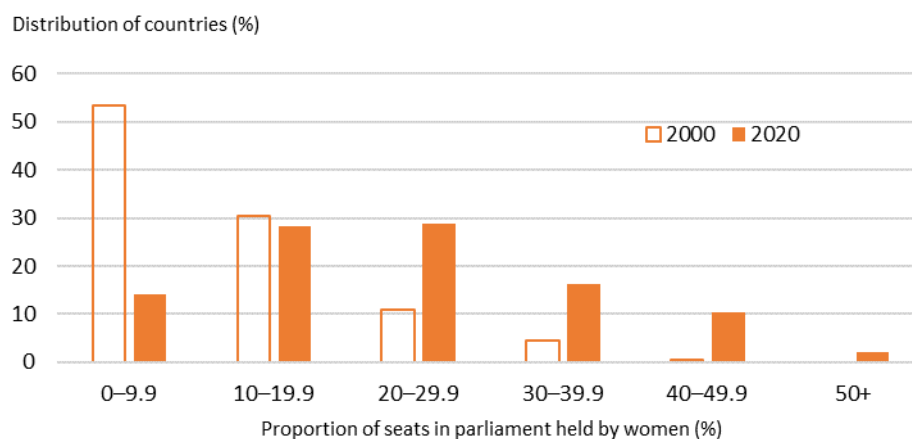
³ Based on calculations of data in “Women in politics: 2020 – situation on 1 January 2020”, IPU and UN-Women, 2020.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

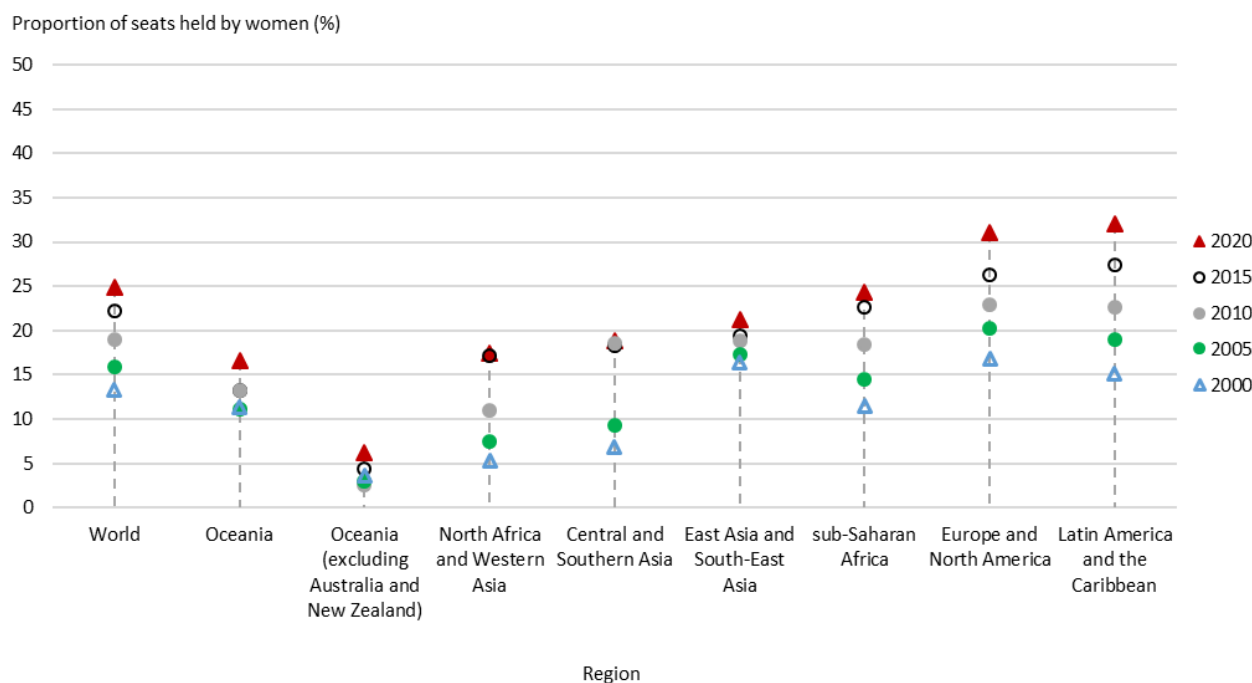
Figure II
Percentage distribution of women in parliament, 2000 and 2020



Source: IPU, Parline database. Available at <https://data.ipu.org/> (accessed on 21 December 2020).

15. Regional disparities exist (see figure III). In Latin America and the Caribbean and in Europe and North America, over 30 per cent of parliamentarians are women, while in North Africa, Western Asia and Oceania, women account for less than 17 per cent of parliamentarians. Women's representation is lowest in the Pacific island States: on average they hold 6 per cent of seats and, in three countries, there are no women in parliament. Women's representation in conflict-affected countries is only 18.9 per cent.

Figure III
Percentage of seats held by women in national parliaments between 2000 and 2020, by region



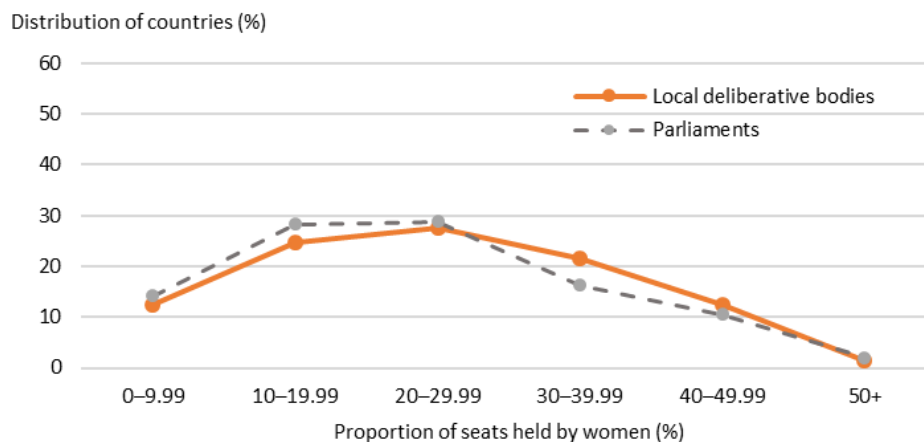
Source: United Nations, "indicator 5.5.1b", Global SDG Indicators Database. Available at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/> (accessed on 21 December 2020).

16. The representation of women in countries with proportional representation or mixed systems is on average 10 percentage points higher than in those with majority or plurality systems. Gender quotas have substantially contributed to this progress. Eighty-four States (44 per cent) have adopted legislation on gender quotas at the parliamentary level. In States with legislated quotas, women are on average elected to 26 per cent of seats in parliament, compared with 21 per cent in countries without such legislation. The impact of using quotas varies within regions by 11 percentage points in Central and Southern Asia, 6 points in sub-Saharan Africa and East and South-East Asia, and 5 points in North Africa and Western Asia, and in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁷

17. The share of women elected to local deliberative bodies is now known as the reporting by States on Sustainable Development Goal indicator 5.5.1b. Data collected in 2019 facilitated the establishment of the first-ever global baseline on this important decision-making indicator. The data from 133 countries and areas reveal that more than 2 million women serve in local deliberative bodies, representing 36 per cent of members elected at the local level. That is a higher proportion than in parliament but not yet close to parity. In only two countries, 50 per cent or more of the local government officials are women, and in 18, over 40 per cent of local government officials are women. Seventy countries fall in the 10 to 29.99 per cent bracket, and 15 have women's representation of less than 10 per cent at the local level, which is similar to the distribution observed for women in parliament (see figure IV).

Figure IV

Percentage distribution of women's representation in local deliberative bodies and parliaments, 2020



Source: IPU, Parline database. Available at <https://data.ipu.org/>; and United Nations, "indicator 5.5.1b", Global SDG Indicators Database. Available at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/> (both accessed on 21 December 2020).

Note: The distributions are based on data on women's representation in local government for 133 countries and areas and data on parliament for 191 countries.

18. Women are underrepresented among local public executives, such as mayors and equivalent executive heads. In Europe, for instance, the share of women municipal mayors in 2019 was half that of municipal councillors, 15 per cent compared with 30 per cent.⁸ Data on the Goals show similar patterns in countries in other regions.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Calculations are by UN-Women on the basis of data for 36 European countries from the European Institute for Gender Equality.

19. As with parliaments, legislated gender quotas for local government are effective in increasing women's representation but are often unambitious. Just 77 States (43 per cent) have adopted gender quota legislation on the number of candidates or reserved seats in local deliberative bodies but only one quarter require a 50 per cent distribution between women and men. Most legislation aims for between 30 and 40 per cent. Globally, women's representation in local government is 7 percentage points higher in countries with legislated quotas than in those without such quotas. In sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa and Western Asia, and the remaining regions of Asia, the use of quotas increases a country's representation of women by 16, 13 and 7 percentage points, respectively.⁹

Women's participation in the public sector

20. Having more women in the public sector and civil service brings more women's perspectives to policy and public service delivery, but women rarely hold leadership positions. Data from 2018 show that women accounted for 45 per cent of the public administration workforce but only 34 per cent of decision-making positions. The region with the highest share of women in public administration decision-making positions is Latin America and the Caribbean (42 per cent) and the lowest share was in the Arab States (17 per cent).¹⁰ Data for Europe show that men are better represented than women in the top two tiers of public administration, and that the gender gap increases from 14 percentage points in the lower tier of administration to 38 percentage points in the top tier.¹¹ There is no global baseline for women's representation in civil service, but the compilation of the first set of data available for indicator 16.7.1 of the Goals, expected in 2021, will fill that important gap.

21. Women's representation in the judiciary is key to ensuring that courts represent their citizens, address their concerns and hand down sound judgments. Forty per cent of judges were women in 2017, which is 35 per cent more than in 2008.¹² In most European countries, there are more women than men professional judges or magistrates, however, women represent 41 per cent of the judges in national supreme courts and only 25 per cent of court presidents, while they are underrepresented as heads of prosecution offices.¹³ In Latin America, only 32 per cent of judges in the highest court or supreme courts are women.¹⁴

22. The lack of women in public sector decision-making positions leaves Governments ill-equipped to respond to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Women, who constitute 70 per cent of health sector workers, are on the front lines. An analysis of COVID-19 task forces from 87 countries found that only 3.5 per cent had gender parity.¹⁵ Effective COVID-19 response and recovery efforts require women to be represented in all their diversity in specialized groups or task forces, as well as in legislative, policy and budgetary decision-making processes, even if that requires the introduction of special measures, such as quotas. Women play a critical role in COVID-19 responses and concrete actions are necessary to ensure their equal participation (see General Assembly resolution [74/306](#)).

⁹ UN-Women, database of legislated quotas at local level (forthcoming in 2021).

¹⁰ Gender Parity in the Civil Service Dataset, developed in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme, containing data on 169 countries, as at 30 November 2020 (forthcoming).

¹¹ Data from the European Institute for Gender Equality for 38 countries in 2019.

¹² Trend data on professional judges or magistrates for 85 countries, disaggregated by sex, from "The World's Women 2020: Trends and Statistics", United Nations.

¹³ Council of Europe and the European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice, *European Judicial Systems: CEPEJ Evaluation Report* (Strasbourg, 2020).

¹⁴ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2020.

¹⁵ Kim Robin Van Daalen and others, "Symptoms of a broken system: the gender gaps in COVID-19 decision-making", *BMJ Global Health*, vol. 5, No. 10 (1 October 2020).

23. When women are not consulted or included in decision-making on issues that have a direct impact on their lives, such as education, health, economic development and conflict resolution, policy outcomes are likely to be harmful and ineffective and to lead to the violation of women's rights. Women's full participation in public life depends on their full access to social protection, sustainable infrastructure and public services, in particular health and education. That is especially the case for women and girls who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, such as women who are indigenous, have disabilities, are poor, belong to ethnic or racial minorities and migrant women. For women to participate and take decisions on an equal footing with men, more efforts are needed to ensure that universal health coverage reforms prioritize the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls across the life course.

Quotas at all levels need to be strengthened

24. Adoption of, and compliance with, gender quota legislation is the main policy intervention that has improved women's participation in national and local decision-making. However, of the 67 countries with legislation on candidate quotas at the national level, only 15 have targets of 50 per cent representation for either sex and 10 have targets of over 40 per cent. No country using reserved seats has a 50 per cent target for women's representation and the proportion of seats reserved for women ranges from 5 to 30 per cent. Increasing quota legislation targets to 50 per cent for each gender would fast track gender parity and the equal representation of women.

25. Even with high targets, the design of quotas is a key factor in their successful application to elected positions. Just 36 countries have achieved the gender targets established in their quota laws. Only 35 States require ranking or have alternate placement requirements for women on candidate lists (such as zipper lists) at the parliamentary level, and 30 States at the local level. Without such measures, women are at risk of being placed too low on candidate lists to have a chance of being elected.

26. Only 34 States have "hard" laws for parliamentary elections and 28 for local elections, in accordance with which the registration of candidate lists that do not meet quota targets is rejected. Some States use financial penalties and/or public funding allocations to increase the proportion of women elected, although some political parties opt to pay fines rather than nominate more women. There is an urgent need to reform Constitutions, adopt laws with parity targets that set clear time frames for all levels of decision-making and in areas of public life beyond political decision-making and to take sanction measures to ensure compliance with quotas.

27. More than half of all States have no legislative measures to achieve equal representation of women and men, while in several of them, fewer than 10 per cent of members of parliament are women. Some countries have reached gender balance without quota legislation, but results depend on political parties' voluntary adoption and implementation of those measures. Voluntary party measures have become more widespread, largely as a result of feminist activism within and outside political parties.

28. In accordance with article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, States parties are required to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life, and in accordance with article 4, States parties are allowed to adopt temporary special measures to accelerate de facto equality between men and women. A wide variety of proven instruments, policies and practices are available, including quotas, resource allocations, preferential treatment, targeted recruitment, hiring and promotion, outreach and support programmes. Discrimination can be addressed on the basis of gender, but also age, race, disability and other personal characteristics. Temporary special measures are a key element of the Secretary-General's call to action for human

rights, aimed at strengthening system-wide application and promotion of women's leadership across all sectors.¹⁶

29. Solutions that have increased women's participation and decision-making in the public sector have also been applied successfully in other sectors. For example, 10 countries have legislated quotas for women on corporate boards of publicly listed companies,¹⁷ and the United Nations system updated its own temporary special measures in 2020 to achieve parity at all levels, as reflected in the system-wide strategy on gender parity. Applying such approaches more systematically across sectors would allow women leaders to help shape public attitudes and also contribute to the expansion of the pool of women candidates ready to take up decision-making positions in political and public life.

III. Women's civil society activism supports change but is challenged by shrinking civic spaces

30. Women play an influential role in public life outside formal public institutions through their involvement in women's organizations and feminist movements, as well as in other civic engagement, including the media, labour unions and academia. Through those channels, women and gender equality advocates successfully promote legislation and mechanisms to advance gender equality and to eliminate laws that are discriminatory against women. They play a critical role in requiring decision makers to be accountable for upholding the human rights of women and girls.

31. Women's and feminist mobilization has grown considerably since 1975, catalysed by transnational feminist movements and conferences, and reaching a peak after the Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace in 1995. By 2015, there was an active women's and/or autonomous feminist movement in nearly every country, with regional variations.¹⁸ Increasingly, local and national movements have found unprecedented global solidarity and resonance on feminist issues.

32. Young women and girls are leading movements calling for broader economic, social and environmental justice and systemic transformation. They tend to be more disenchanted with party politics and less attached to formal institutions than previous generations.¹⁹ They also bring feminist principles of inclusion and systemic change to global and national causes on specific justice and rights issues, as seen in the global Black Lives Matter and the climate strike movements.²⁰ Moreover, they see that unequal power relations and systems are exacerbating poverty and inequalities, and constraining the voice and agency of marginalized groups.

33. Women's rights and social justice organizations drive collective action for gender equality through strategies and alliances with political actors, in order to influence normative change, transform institutions and increase women's inclusion in public life. They hold leaders accountable for addressing issues such as gender-based violence, access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, workplace rights, financial inclusion, the repeal of discriminatory legislation and compliance with

¹⁶ "The highest aspiration: a call to action for human rights", available at www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/The_Highest_Aspiration_A_Call_To_Action_For_Human_Right_English.pdf.

¹⁷ World Bank, *Women, Business and the Law 2016: Getting to Equal* (Washington, D.C., 2015).

¹⁸ S. Laurel Weldon and others, "Women's informal participation in political and public life and space: global trends and challenges", background paper for the expert group meeting at the sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 2020.

¹⁹ Maxine Molyneux and others, "Feminist activism 25 years after Beijing", *Gender and Development*, vol. 28, No. 2 (2020), pp. 315–336.

²⁰ Ibid.

national laws and international agreements. Pressure applied by women's rights organizations has been instrumental in the adoption of quota laws in many countries. Participation in protest and social movements can help women acquire political experience and connections, and prompt them to run for office.²¹

34. In conflict and fragile contexts, women's organizations and feminist movements often take the lead in aid provision, social cohesion and conflict prevention. The number of women participating in formal peace processes as negotiators and mediators is still low but has increased because of concerted advocacy by women's organizations.

35. Online activism is an increasingly critical tool for feminists, as digital platforms become public spaces in which new strategies to influence policy and politics are forged.²² Online social campaigns have influenced transnational and global politics, such as the "MeToo" movement (#metoo), which had consequences for perpetrators and led to tangible policy reform in multiple countries, and the Ni Una Menos (not one woman less) movement (#niunamenos). Expanding digital access is essential so that women with fewer resources are not left behind.

36. In some contexts, shrinking civic space is hampering women's effective participation in civil society.²³ Space for participation is being limited by laws that have restricted the freedoms of assembly, association and expression in some countries. Legal and administrative measures are creating obstacles for women's organizations to register, engage in advocacy, receive external funding and report on rights issues in some contexts. Since 2008, civil society repression has deepened in 26 countries, while conditions have improved in only 17 (E/CN.6/2020/3, para. 194).

37. Women's organizations are active in COVID-19 responses, supporting those most affected economically, ensuring that shelters remain open for domestic violence survivors and disseminating public health messages to communities.²⁴ At the same time, consultations and rapid assessments conducted by the United Nations show that the pandemic has created new challenges for women's rights organizations and exacerbated pre-existing ones. For many women's organizations, COVID-19 has led to mobility restrictions, while increased surveillance has further reduced organizing space, exacerbated poor working conditions and led to a decrease in resources at a time when demands have increased.²⁵

38. Underinvestment is also a persistent challenge. Direct funding of women's organizations accounts for less than 1 per cent of the global official development assistance provided for gender equality and women's empowerment (\$198 million), most of which flows through larger organizations which may not meet local needs.²⁶ Where funding does reach women's organizations, it is typically small-scale and short-term and does not enable vital expansion, or the scaling up and strengthening of organizational and operational capacity. Increased access to direct, flexible and sustainable funding is necessary to sustain women's full participation in public life.

²¹ Weldon and others, "Women's informal participation". See also Fatou Sow, "Social change and the role of feminist movements, CSOs and networks in raising awareness on women in public and political life", expert paper prepared for the expert group meeting at the sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 2020.

²² Weldon and others, "Women's informal participation"; Pippa Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Elisabeth Jay Friedman, *Interpreting the Internet: Feminist and Queer Counterpublics in Latin America* (University of California Press, 2017).

²³ Weldon and others, "Women's informal participation".

²⁴ United Nations, "Shared responsibility, global solidarity: responding to the socioeconomic aspects of COVID-19", March 2020.

²⁵ UN-Women, "COVID-19 and women's rights organizations", policy brief (forthcoming).

²⁶ UN-Women, *Gender Equality: Women's Rights in Review 25 Years After Beijing* (New York, 2020).

39. Intensified efforts are needed to reform legal provisions that prevent women from engaging in public life or in women's organizations and movements, and that limit their enjoyment of their political and civil rights to exercise the freedoms of assembly, association and expression, as well as the right to vote and to be elected.

IV. Violence against women in public life threatens women's participation

40. Violence and harassment against women in public life is a human rights violation. It has seemingly increased as more women have gained access to power.²⁷ Perpetrators intend to stop women from accessing power and silence them so as to limit their perspectives in policy formulation. Women politicians have been killed in office, left their positions after receiving death threats or withdrawn from elections citing abuse. Women voters, candidates and election administrators have faced targeted, gender-based violence in elections. Human rights defenders, women's organizations and feminist groups have been targeted, and women of colour have experienced disproportionate levels of violence.²⁸ Online, gender-based abuse, cyberbullying and sexual harassment is increasingly common against women active in public life.

41. The Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences has indicated that this particular form of violence consists of any act of gender-based violence, or threat of such acts, that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering and is directed against a woman in politics because she is a woman, or affects women disproportionately ([A/73/301](#)). More than 80 per cent of women parliamentarians interviewed in 2016 had experienced on-the-job psychological violence; one third of them had experienced economic violence; one quarter had experienced physical violence; and one fifth had experienced sexual violence.²⁹

42. Despite those alarming levels of violence, fewer than one quarter of parliaments have a sexual harassment policy for parliamentarians, and fewer than half have a policy for parliamentary staff.³⁰ Women parliamentarians recently reported being exposed to torture, ill-treatment and acts of violence nearly twice as much as men, and the COVID-19 pandemic has potentially exacerbated the number of violent threats.³¹ In its resolution [73/148](#), the General Assembly called upon national legislative authorities and political parties to adopt codes of conduct and reporting mechanisms, or revise existing ones, stating zero tolerance for sexual harassment, intimidation and any other form of violence against women in politics.

43. Ultimately, States are responsible for preventing, investigating and punishing acts of violence against women in public life. Only one country has a stand-alone law criminalizing violence against women in politics, while a few have advanced legal reforms to address acts of political violence in existing laws. One country has adopted judicial protocols to prosecute cases based on national case law and international commitments. National gender observatories and/or civil society monitoring

²⁷ Julie Ballington, "Turning the tide on violence against women in politics: how are we measuring up?", *Politics and Gender*, vol. 14, No. 4 (December 2018).

²⁸ Dubravka Šimonović, "Violence against women in politics", expert paper prepared for the expert group meeting at the sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 2020.

²⁹ IPU, "Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians", Issues Brief (Geneva, October 2016).

³⁰ IPU, "Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe", Issues Brief (Geneva, October 2018).

³¹ IPU, "Annual IPU figures reveal increasing violence against parliamentarians, especially women MPs", 2 December 2020.

mechanisms in some countries track data on violence against women in public life, and some also coordinate essential services for survivors (see [A/73/301](#)).

44. States, international organizations, security forces, the media and other stakeholders now have greater awareness and means available to prevent and respond to violence, largely through the advocacy of women in office and women's rights organizations. International and regional human rights mechanisms and special procedure mandate holders have also helped to build awareness, including by providing mechanisms for reporting violence.³²

45. Prevention and response efforts urgently need to be intensified, in particular to reform legislation, strengthen access to justice and monitoring, and enhance coordination among stakeholders. Necessary steps include criminalizing violence against women in politics, improving the protection of victims, building the capacity of State institutions and law enforcement bodies to apply laws and respond to incidents, strengthening judicial and complaints mechanisms, collecting and monitoring data on incidence and prevalence, and setting standards on what constitutes online violence against women in public life so that the media and companies running social media platforms can be held accountable for such content.

V. Social norms constrain women's participation in public life

46. Discriminatory social norms about gender roles exacerbate unequal access to political participation. Attitudes about women in public life have shifted only modestly in the past 25 years, even as more women have gained leadership positions. In many countries, social norms and cultural values continue to reinforce perceptions that men make better leaders than women. Thirty-six per cent of people surveyed between 2017 and 2020 still considered that men make better politicians than women.³³ Expressions of aggression, competitiveness, dominance and decisiveness are perceived positively for men but negatively for women.

47. Where laws and policies designed to promote women's role in public life do exist, negative social norms and gender stereotypes can hinder their implementation and impact. Gender norms and legal rights influence women's ability to exercise their rights to education and health, specifically sexual and reproductive health, which in turn constrains their possibilities to participate and lead. Countering social norms that threaten women's rights and participation in public life requires raising awareness and sensitizing community and religious leaders, the media, men and boys and different generations of women, so that the norms can be adjusted through deliberate action, including the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence and harmful practices. Increased community and civic understanding of gender equality and women's rights to participate in public life and decision-making through advocacy and social mobilization are critical to bringing about changes to negative stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes so that women are perceived as equally legitimate and effective leaders as men.

48. The media and the advertising and film industries tend to reinforce gender stereotypes and cover women's roles or public pronouncements to a lesser extent than those of men. The media, for example, often focus more on women leaders' appearance, personality and family than the merits of their candidacies or policies.³⁴

³² For example, the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls have reporting mechanisms available.

³³ World Values Survey, Data Wave 7 (2017–2020). Available at www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp.

³⁴ Daphne Joanna Van der Pas and Loes Aalderling, "Gender differences in political media coverage: a meta-analysis" *Journal of Communication*, vol. 70, No. 1 (February 2020), pp. 114–143.

There is substantial male bias in global news coverage of COVID-19: men are quoted three to five times more than women and 19 per cent of expert sources consulted are women, whereas 77 per cent are men.³⁵ To reverse this requires a range of measures, including raising awareness among those working in the media and the advertising and film industries, and developing codes of conduct to define and redress gender discrimination. State institutions and private donors can support public information campaigns with positive messages and images of women's roles in public life to help change perceptions.

49. A gradual change in norms is also being reflected in the private sector, supporting greater women's participation and decision-making. The International Labour Organization (ILO) Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) represents a recent advance in the protection of workers' rights, providing an inclusive and gender-responsive approach for the prevention and elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work. States should ratify and enforce that Convention.

50. The support and political will of male leaders who publicly promote gender equality and women's equal participation in public life is vital for accelerating changes to social norms. People are particularly responsive to gender equality messaging conveyed by traditional leaders, political party leaders, Heads of State and Government, celebrities and other public figures.³⁶ Global initiatives encouraging men in executive leadership to champion gender equality, such as the HeForShe movement, have produced positive results, including male leaders cooperating to change social norms about gender-based violence and child marriage.³⁷

VI. Building towards a better future

Need for strengthening institutional arrangements to promote gender equality

51. Achieving gender equality is a collective responsibility for which men and women need to work together to transform institutions and systems. Systematic scrutiny of institutions and their operations, facilities, policies, procedures, written and unwritten rules, norms and cultures to reveal and remedy "unseen" barriers to women's participation is required. Institutions, historically designed by men, have inherent biases that constrain women's decision-making opportunities.

52. If more women are in parliament, they can create stronger alliances with each other to advocate gender-responsive laws, policies and budgets. When more women are elected to office, policymaking tends to reflect the priorities of families and women.³⁸ Women have worked across party lines to address gender-based violence, promote sexual and reproductive health and rights, secure more funding for health care, education and socioeconomic issues, and support gender-responsive policies across sectors. Their work is facilitated when they have institutionalized meeting spaces and expertise, as is the case of 93 parliaments that have women's caucuses and 107 parliaments with gender equality specialized committees.³⁹ Legislatures could benefit from putting more

³⁵ Luba Kassova, *The Missing Perspectives of Women in COVID-19 News: A Special Report on Women's Underrepresentation in News Media* (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2019).

³⁶ Emina Subašić and others, "'We for she': mobilizing men and women to act in solidarity for gender equality", *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, vol. 21, No. 5 (August 2018), pp. 707–724.

³⁷ UN-Women, *HeForShe Impact Report 2019* (New York, 2019).

³⁸ Leslie A. Schwindt-Bayer, "Female legislators and the promotion of women, children, and family policies in Latin America", background paper for *The State of the World's Children 2007: Women and Children – The Double Dividend of Gender Equality* (New York, December 2006).

³⁹ IPU data as at 1 November 2020.

resources into gender equality committees or commissions, networking forums, women's caucuses and capacity-building with regard to gender equality.

53. A lack of care facilities deters women with families and care responsibilities from pursuing leadership in public life and other spheres of leadership. Women's care responsibilities have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and, according to an assessment of 144 civil society organization grantees of the United Nations trust fund in support of actions to eliminate violence against women, staff members in numerous organizations report feeling "overwhelmed and burned out" by an unprecedented high demand for services.⁴⁰ To reduce the burden on women, who often take on most care duties in the family, more family-friendly working conditions are urgently needed in order to recruit and retain women of all ages in public life, including by setting up support systems, such as aligning legislative chamber sittings with school calendars, providing childcare facilities and financial assistance, and adopting other measures to support the work-life balance. Institutions, political parties and civil society organizations must also adopt inclusive practices and a zero-tolerance policy to gender-based discrimination and harassment.⁴¹

54. Collaboration between politicians and women's rights organizations and feminist movements is critical in driving transformative change and responding to the needs of women's constituencies. Networks bringing together women politicians and women's organizations from different sectors have advanced gender equality policies and laws and promoted the inclusion of marginalized voices in decision-making. Alliances around specific issues, such as ending violence against women or protecting the labour rights of domestic workers, have led to changes in policies and laws.⁴²

55. Opening parliamentary or governmental hearings to women's organizations when adjudicating on key issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic and reporting on policy implementation would be beneficial. Gender-sensitive approaches to the pandemic response and recovery efforts are needed. It is an opportunity to rebuild better by institutionalizing gender-sensitive working arrangements in public institutions to support equal decision-making for women.⁴³

Need for increased funding for women in political and public life

56. Funding to support women in public life is limited and needs to increase if women are to have equal opportunities to participate and engage in decision-making. Research shows that a lack of funding is one of the primary barriers to women's participation in politics.⁴⁴ Women struggle to raise funds for building their name and recognition, winning party nominations, campaigns and party contributions, and for voter contact, especially in rural or remote areas. Many women lack economic independence, and social norms contribute to perceptions that fundraising is

⁴⁰ UN-Women, United Nations trust fund in support of actions to eliminate violence against women, "COVID-19 and the impact on civil society organizations: working to end violence against women and girls", 29 September 2020.

⁴¹ IPU, "Supporting gender-sensitive parliaments: a key strategy in advancing women's political participation and the eradication of violence against women in politics", observer paper prepared for the expert group meeting at the sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 2020.

⁴² Jennifer Piscopo, "Impact of women's leadership in public life and political decision-making", expert paper prepared for the expert group meeting at the sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 2020.

⁴³ Sarah Childs and others, "A primer for parliamentary action: Gender-sensitive responses to COVID-19", New York, UN-Women, 2020.

⁴⁴ Julie Ballington and Muriel Kahane "Women in politics: financing for gender equality" in *Funding of Political Parties and Election Campaigns: a Handbook on Political Finance*, Elin Falguera, Samuel Jones and Magnus Ohman, eds. (Stockholm, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2014), pp. 300–343.

“improper” for women. Political parties tend to financially support incumbents, who are more often men. Political campaigns that depend on large private donations often linked to personal wealth, moneyed networks and individual fundraising capacities disadvantage women.⁴⁵ States in which political parties receive direct public funding tend to create a more level playing field. Public funding allocations conditional on political parties apportioning funds to women candidates (i.e. 50 per cent) or which earmark public funds for gender equality initiatives offer examples for replication.

57. National gender equality mechanisms frequently lack the financing, capacity and decision-making clout to ensure that national planning and policymaking contribute to gender equality. While the COVID-19 pandemic has caused an increase in the need for the services that women’s organizations provide, such as support to survivors of violence against women, many organizations are seeing cuts to their budgets and are forced to lay off staff and reduce activities, especially advocacy and policy work.⁴⁶

58. New funding and financing mechanism models to promote women’s participation in public life are needed. For women in politics, these include establishing political party funds to assist women candidates with campaigns, promoting partisan fundraising networks to bundle small public contributions to women, providing subsidies, including for childcare costs, and increasing non-partisan fundraising, including through crowdfunding platforms and endowments.

59. For women’s organizations, dedicated funds that apply feminist funding principles can help. Several countries, United Nations agencies and philanthropic foundations have recently set up mechanisms to attract direct funding for women’s organizations and specialized gender equality funds in different areas, including women and peace and security, democracy and ending violence against women (see [S/2020/946](#), paras. 91–102).

Leaving no one behind in public life and decision-making

60. Gender equality cannot be achieved unless public life and decision-making includes women and girls in all their diversity. That is also a matter of good governance. Women in rural areas, women with disabilities, indigenous women, lesbian, bisexual and intersex women and transgender persons, women migrants, girls, women of African descent and women of colour continue to face discrimination and exclusion from public life. For instance, women in rural areas are underrepresented in local decision-making and are inadequately consulted on national policies and programmes on agriculture, extractive industries, food security, climate change and disaster response and risk reduction. Indigenous women are excluded from decision-making related to communal and traditional indigenous lands and are not consulted equally on the use of their natural resources and lands.⁴⁷ Women of colour are ineffectively represented in and consulted on policy and legislative measures. The rights and access of women with disabilities to justice and decision-making are not fully protected.

61. Across all groups of women facing discrimination, common gaps exist and need to be addressed as part of States’ commitments and obligations under human rights instruments. Temporary special measures for those groups could accelerate progress. In addition, more specific data on the participation and decision-making of women who face multiple forms of discrimination are needed. Most available data focus on

⁴⁵ Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Handbook on Promoting Women’s Participation in Political Parties* (Warsaw, 2014).

⁴⁶ UN-Women, “COVID-19 and women’s rights organizations” (forthcoming).

⁴⁷ Otilia Lux de Coti, “Participación y discriminación de las mujeres indígenas y afrodescendientes”, expert paper prepared for the expert group meeting at the sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 2020.

the number of women in politics but are not disaggregated according to women's race, ethnicity, age and other factors. Lack of data disaggregation by subcategories, for both women and men, impedes full analysis.

62. Young women face double discrimination from persisting social norms and age roles in public life. Young women are particularly underrepresented in politics. Women under 30 years of age make up less than 1 per cent of parliamentarians globally.⁴⁸ There are more young people between the ages of 10 and 24 today than at any other time in history,⁴⁹ and yet millions of adolescent girls and young women are disproportionately excluded from consultation on issues that affect them. Measures are needed to facilitate young women's increased leadership, such as access to education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, technology and skills development, leadership and mentorship programmes, and protection from violence and discriminatory legislation.

63. Good governance requires leadership renewal and succession, enabled through mentorship and intergenerational dialogue, and by building a pipeline between future leaders and young women who are interested in public life and office.⁵⁰ The entry of diverse women into the political pipeline requires encouragement, and it is of particular importance that women and girls are protected from violence and discrimination. Early exposure to women leaders, as well as to legislative and policymaking spaces, gives young women and girls invaluable experience, broadens their networks, and strengthens their opportunities to have their voices heard in present and future decision-making and become fully engaged citizens. Young women and girls are more receptive to different forms of activism, to cooperation with people with diverse identities and perspectives, and to collaborative and consensus-building approaches.⁵¹ They are also at the forefront of movements calling for systemic change across all dimensions of sustainable development. The future belongs to their generation but requires their joint commitment and action.

VII. Conclusions and recommendations

64. Transforming the balance of power is essential for promoting and protecting women's human rights and solving the urgent challenges of the current age, from deepening inequalities and polarization, to the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Progress with regard to achieving parity between men and women in all areas of public life and decision-making has been too slow. Women have played influential roles in political decision-making and civil society, but increasingly face violence, both online and offline. Transformative change to advance gender equality and women's empowerment depends on political will, close cooperation between women and men, networking among women in different decision-making positions, gender-responsive institutions, and the provision of greater financing for women in public life. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, gender equality in decision-making needs to be fast tracked. It is critical to apply effective and ambitious quotas, appoint an equal number of women and men to all public positions, eliminate violence against women and enable the participation of all groups of women,

⁴⁸ IPU, *Youth participation in national parliaments: 2018* (Geneva, 2018).

⁴⁹ United Nations Population Fund, World Population Dashboard.

⁵⁰ Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski, *Political Recruitment: Gender, Race and Class in the British Parliament* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁵¹ Amani Aruri, "Advancing youth participation to achieve gender transformative change", expert paper prepared for the expert group meeting at the sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, 2020.

especially young women, to strengthen women's voices for the achievement of gender equality for women and girls.

65. To achieve gender equality and the full and effective participation of women in decision-making and public life, the Commission on the Status of Women may wish to urge Governments and other stakeholders to take the action set out below.

Strengthen normative, legal and regulatory frameworks

(a) Fully implement existing commitments and obligations with respect to the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, and the full and equal enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms;

(b) Undertake comprehensive reforms to eliminate laws, policies and regulations that discriminate against women;

(c) Establish targets, action plans and timelines to achieve gender parity for all executive, legislative and administrative positions, as well as in public commissions, task forces and negotiation teams;

(d) Appoint women to executive positions to ensure gender parity in local and national governments;

(e) Adopt electoral and quota laws with 50 per cent targets and ensure implementation through rank order rules and sanctions for non-compliance;

(f) Adopt and effectively implement a range of regulations and temporary special measures for the public and private sectors to accelerate equal participation of women in decision-making and leadership, including for women facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination;

(g) Repeal or amend legal provisions that contribute to the shrinking of civic space or reduce women's organizations' abilities to register, engage in advocacy, receive external funding and report on rights issues;

(h) Improve the collection and use of globally comparable data, disaggregated by sex, age and other factors, on women's participation and decision-making in public administration, the judiciary, political parties and other areas of political and public life;

Prevent and eliminate violence against women in public life

(i) Reform legal frameworks to criminalize violence against women in political and public life, both online and offline, and to end impunity;

(j) Build the capacity of law enforcement personnel, prosecutors and judges to apply laws on violence against women, respond to incidents and hold perpetrators accountable;

(k) Establish and ensure access to complaints and reporting mechanisms for survivors of violence;

(l) Allocate resources for training, prevention and essential services to eliminate violence against women in political and public life;

(m) Ensure that women human rights defenders and members of women's organizations and feminist movements are protected from violence for engaging in public life;

(n) **Continue to fund international and regional human rights mechanisms and special procedures to monitor, report and provide recommendations on violence against women in public and political life;**

(o) **Set standards on what constitutes online violence against women in public life so that the media and companies running social media platforms can be held accountable for such content;**

(p) **Increase the capacity of national statistical systems to collect data regularly and systematically (both online and offline) on violence against women in public life;**

Strengthen gender-responsive institutional reforms

(q) **Ensure gender-sensitive approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery by appointing women and gender equality advocates to leadership positions through gender parity targets for relevant task forces, standing committees and other decision-making bodies;**

(r) **Fund specialized gender equality committees or commissions and women's caucuses, and networking forums, and build institutional capacity on gender equality in parliaments, ministries and public administration;**

(s) **Ensure that all public institutions have in place, and comply with, codes of conduct that establish zero tolerance for violence, discrimination and abuse, and internal reporting and complaints mechanisms;**

(t) **Ratify and put in force the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190);**

(u) **Increase transparency in institutions and allow members of women's organizations and feminist movements access to debates and decision-making processes, to voice their opinions and share their expertise;**

Increase the availability of high-quality financing in support of women's participation in public life

(v) **Create conditions and incentives for women candidates' campaigns to be financially supported from public and private funds, including through gender-sensitive political financing, subsidies for childcare, fundraising networks and non-partisan crowdfunding and endowments;**

(w) **Incentivize political parties to finance women's campaigns and promote their leadership;**

(x) **Raise the percentage of official development assistance funds that go to stand-alone gender equality targets and women's organizations;**

(y) **Increase the quality and quantity of funding available to support women in public life through the creation and financing of specific funds that prioritize direct funding to women's organizations and feminist movements;**

Strengthen women's voice and leave no one behind in public life

(z) **Facilitate the entry of women into the political pipeline through capacity-building, training and awareness-raising, and provide targeted support to women facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination to participate in public life and politics;**

(aa) **Implement awareness-raising measures and sensitize community and religious leaders, the media, men and boys and different generations of women**

to counter social norms that restrict women's rights and participation in public life and decision-making and to take deliberate action to adjust those norms;

(bb) Strengthen an enabling environment for women's participation in public life and decision-making by addressing women's poverty, unpaid care burden, unequal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, education and technology, and fostering skills development;

(cc) Increase young women's representation and participation in public life through community outreach, mentoring, capacity development programmes and early exposure to legislative and policymaking spaces;

(dd) Incentivize the media and the advertising and film industries to reverse gender discrimination in the portrayal of women leaders in public life and decision-making;

(ee) Fund and support public information campaigns with positive messages and images of women's role in public life to help change stereotypes.

66. The Commission may wish to call upon the United Nations system and other international organizations to work collaboratively to support Member States in implementing, measuring and monitoring the foregoing recommendations at all levels.
