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Women like parties. Except political ones

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Women, on average, have less trust in governments and less interest in politics than men. They do not join parties to the same extent as men, but they do participate in civic and associational life, and seem to prefer different channels in expressing their participation. How to improve their political engagement?

Non-discrimination is a basic founding value of the European Union. European legislation prohibits discrimination on grounds of nationality, sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age and sexual orientation. This is a core right upon which citizenship is built.

However, various statistics evidence significant differences in the levels of political participation between men and women in the Eu. These same data also reveal that women and men are drawn to different forms of participation. Men engage in formal politics to a greater extent than women, while women are more disposed to informal and less time-intensive political activities. The combined evidence leads to the conclusion that **women, on average, feel significantly less politically efficacious and have substantially less trust in government and interest in politics than men.** Apart from undermining the legitimacy of a democratic system, gender gaps in political participation act to reinforce gender inequalities in societies, as citizens who do not articulate their interests run the risk of being ignored. If women are less politically engaged than men, their substantive representation will be affected as their perspectives and interests will fail to be reflected in political decision-making to the same extent as those of men. **Therefore,**

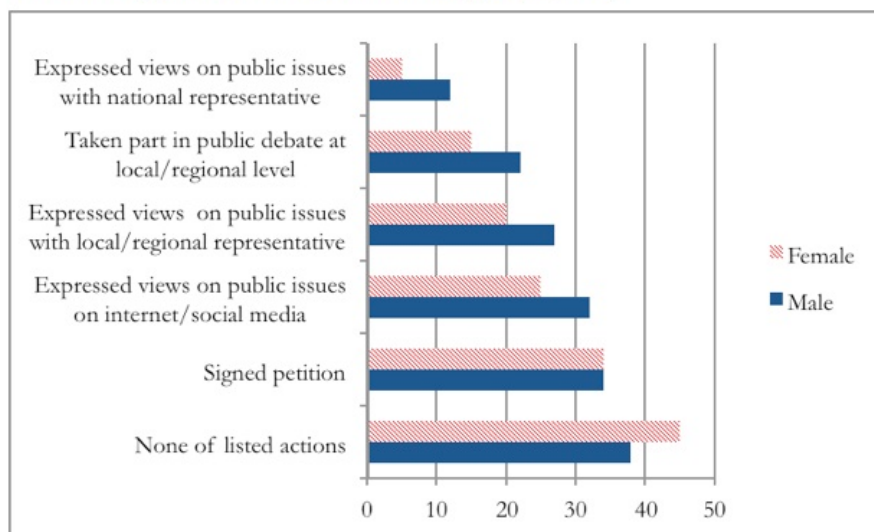
facilitating opportunities for greater political participation among women with a view to redressing gender gaps in the levels of engagement can be expected to strengthen democracy, benefiting not only women as a group but society at large.

According to the latest Eurobarometer data, women's level of trust in political institutions is less than men's. National parliaments are trusted by 26% of women and 29% of men, political parties by 14% of women and 16% of men, and the European Parliament by 43% of women and 45% of men.

Men are more active than women in conventional forms of political participation (for example, involvement in a political party or contacting a politician) and, to a marginal extent, in non-conventional forms of political participation (for example signing a petition or involvement in a demonstration). 45% of women do not express their views on public issues in various forums and to their representatives compared to 38% of men.

Women and men are equally likely to engage in individualised forms of political participation that are less time intensive such as signing petitions.

Influencing political decision-making (% , by sex)



Source: European Commission (2013).

There are variations in women's representation in national parliaments across the member states. It stands at 27% on average, with Cyprus (11%) having the lowest and Sweden (43%) the highest levels of women's political representation. These variations result from the different interactions in the various member states of political culture, electoral systems, and the presence of measures to increase participation by women. Historical patterns, too, play a role. The changing role and status of women over the decades, with increasing levels of women's education and labour force participation in all Member States, provides a wider pool of potential candidates over time. These conditions interact with institutional arrangements, with women's representation in parliament boosted in countries with voluntary or legalized gender quotas or in countries with proportional representation for party lists where preferences for individual candidates cannot be expressed.

Women's participation in civil society is an important public space where citizenship claims can be articulated. Indeed, there is a positive view across the European Union of women's interest and capacity to fill public decision-making positions. While there are individual countries – in the Eastern part of Europe in particular - where there is evidence of public resistance to women's engagement in civic decision-making, these attitudes are amenable to change over time.

Various strategies are employed to bring more women into areas of public responsibility, and much attention is directed at increasing women's political representation. **Quotas in various forms have become a more widespread strategy for delivering this objective, though their use remains contentious.**

Women may not join parties to the same extent as men, but they do participate in civic and associational life, and seem to prefer different channels to men in expressing that participation.

Men are more likely to participate in employment-related associations. In trade unions 7.2% of men are active members vs. 4.9% of women. Women are more likely to be involved in charitable or humanitarian organizations where 7.4% of women are active members vs. 5.8% of men. Men are more likely to be found in leadership positions across all sectors of public and civic life. The consequence of this is that women have fewer opportunities for exercising leadership skills in environments that channel individuals into political life.

Social media and IT technologies are widely used as tools for civic and social engagement. There is evidence that they are increasingly used for raising women's citizenship claims and for discussing gender related issues relevant to women's lives. The mushrooming of women's commentary on social media, and the prevalence of feminist blogs indicate the extent to which women have taken to social media to inform themselves and share their views. Some of these interventions in the new social media become influential opinion-shapers in their own right: UKFeminista, for example, advocates for gender equality through online campaigns, the creation of the Italian women's movement, *Se Non Ora Quando (If Not Now When)*, was fostered by social media. Modern channels of communication can be particularly important for women from minority groups. Younger women can access safe and informative cyberspace locations, and participate as contributors and bloggers as an alternative to other forms of civic mobilization.

It is important to recognise the valuable contribution that diverse perspectives can bring to public issues. In this regard, women's views on, and engagement with, policy and politics at all levels can contribute to the collective resolution of public issues. Thus, actions that promote women's participation are necessary, given women's different pattern of public activism to that of men. **All public bodies, at all levels, should be encouraged to adopt strategies to enable women's voices in their diversity to be heard, and women to participate and be represented, in their deliberations.**

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