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Women's Political Participation in North Macedonia: What has been achieved so far?

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Abstract

Women's political participation is a prerequisite for women's empowerment and gender equality in society. To increase the number of women participating in political and decision-making processes and consequently becoming an active voice in governmental institutions, many countries, including North Macedonia, have introduced quota systems as an affirmative measure to. Prior to establishing legislated gender quotas in 2002, only three of North Macedonia's political parties had introduced voluntary political party gender quotas to support women's political participation. This paper conducts a analysis of the progress of women's participation in decision-making, since the 2002 legislated quota system in North Macedonia. Additionally, it explores further steps that should be taken into consideration to help overcome the everlasting gender inequality of women's political participation. It focuses primarily in the executive branch of the government including not only ministerial positions but also positions of mayors and executive board members. To achieve the above objectives, the paper relies on a systematic literature review that synthesizes and selects all existing papers, reports, official documents, and other relevant data.

Keywords: gender equality, women's empowerment, women's political participation, affirmative measures, legislated quotas

Introduction

Gender equality and women empowerment are fundamental component of every democratic society. Central to these concepts is women's

political participation, which serves as a cornerstone for encouraging inclusive governance and promoting diverse perspectives in the decision-making processes. Despite the significant progress made in the last decades, inequality still characterizes women's representation in the political sphere globally. Considering the critical significance of addressing this matter righteously, many countries have implemented different set of measures, including the legal quota systems, to promote and increase the inclusion of women in the political processes.

In North Macedonia, as in many other countries, efforts to increase women's political participation are taking place over the course of many years. The introduction of legal gender quotas in 2002 marked a historical moment and a positive turning point towards a fairer representation of women. Prior to this landmark achievement, only a handful of political parties had voluntarily applied gender quotas within their structures. However, the effect of the above-mentioned measures and the progress attained until now, regarding women's political representation, continue to remain a subject of evaluation and further investigation.

This article aims to present a comprehensive scientific analysis on the progress of women's political representation in North Macedonia prior and post the introduction of the legal gender quotas in 2002. In particular, the paper aims to evaluate the impact of these affirmative measures on the representation of women in the decision-making processes, not only within the legislative body, but also of the executive branch of the government. Besides the outcome within the states national assembly, the emphasis will be placed on the ministerial positions, as well as on other public functions such as municipality mayors and members of the executive board. These positions are crucial for the creation of policies and governance across different levels.

In achieving the above objectives, the article relies on a systematic literature review, which consists of a wide range of sources, such as academic papers, reports, official documents, and other relevant data. Through the synthesization of existing knowledge, this study attempts to shed light over the current situation regarding women's political participation in North Macedonia and to furthermore identify potential avenues for greater improvement of this issue.

The following sections of this paper will elaborate on a detailed examination of the already achieved progress, of the current challenges, and of the necessary future steps in addressing the continuous gender inequality and gender balanced political participation. By following such a structure this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse over gender equality. It will also offer valuable knowledge for policymakers, actors from the civil society, researchers, and scholars.

Literature review

In our pursuit to address assumptions regarding the gender quotas' impact on women's political participation and gender equality in the decision-making processes, the literature review section is structured to synthesize the most relevant research and theories around three pillars. More specifically, the literature review integrates existing knowledge and scholarly contribution around the concepts of:

- I. Challenges to women's political participation,
- II. The impact of legislated gender quotas,
- III. And the effectiveness of affirmative measures beyond quotas.

Achieving substantive gender equality in political representation requires comprehensive strategies that address structural inequalities, challenge societal norms, and empower women to actively participate in decision-making processes. Therefore, the approach we selected for this section, is expected to provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding women's political engagement, especially in settings such as North Macedonia.

I. Challenges to women's political participation

Scholars have identified a myriad of challenges and barriers that inhibit women's full participation in political processes. These barriers encompass social, cultural, and institutional dimensions, ranging from entrenched patriarchal norms to structural biases within political systems. Cultural expectations regarding women's roles and responsibilities, coupled with limited access to resources and networks, pose significant obstacles to women's political engagement. Moreover, gendered stereotypes and biases perpetuate systemic inequalities, further marginalizing women in political leadership positions. Understanding and addressing these multifaceted challenges are essential for advancing gender equality in political representation. Therefore, this article organizes the existing research around several most significant challenges to women's political participation, especially in contexts similar to that of North Macedonia.

I.1. Cultural biases: gender stereotypes within a male-dominated society

The perpetuation of entrenched gender stereotypes represents serious barriers to women's full participation in the political processes, reflecting broader attitudes and societal expectations in relation to

gender roles and capabilities. The research of Kenworthy and Malami (1999) suggests the domination of patriarchal and traditional societal norms in transitional societies, emphasizing the prioritization of women's responsibilities within the domestic realm. Such norms continue to prevail within different ethnic groups and geographical regions, with particularly pronounced effects within the rural areas (Sadie, 2005). Stereotypes around economic and political capacities of women remain widely accepted. These stereotypes contribute to the lack of confidence in women to transition from their traditional roles into activities outside of their domestic sphere (see Lefkofridi et al. 2019, Dolan 2014, Brians 2005, etc).

Despite the prevalence of conservative social norms, some findings suggest a surprisingly high level of support for women's participation and in electoral and political processes within the general population. Inglehart and Norris (2004) discuss attitudes towards gender equality and political participation, highlighting an increasing support for enhanced opportunities for women in politics. They attribute such shift in favor of greater women representation to the modernization of the of the society and the cultivation of post-materialistic values, where the personal autonomy and egalitarian values are cherished and held in high regard. In such context, a study by Support to electoral reforms in North Macedonia (2022) conducted in North Macedonia, reveals several reasons which include the pursuit of gender equality and the belief in the equal capabilities of both sexes. However, perceptions of traditional gender roles and stereotypes persist as significant barriers to women's political participation, particularly in rural areas where such attitudes are more prevalent.

Prominent authors such as Dolan (2014), or Lawless and Fox (2005), investigate gender dynamics in political decision-making and candidate evaluation, revealing gender bias in considerations of political affiliation and physical appearance. Moreover, stereotypes surrounding women's roles as mothers and wives intersect with perceptions of women's suitability for political leadership. Women candidates often face challenges related to public exposure and stereotypes questioning their emotional stability and decision-making capabilities (see Carrol and Sanbonmatsu 2013, Krook and O'Brien 2010, etc). These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to challenge and dismantle entrenched gender stereotypes, fostering an inclusive political environment conducive to women's full and equal participation.

On a different note, the influence of a male-dominated society presents formidable barriers to women's advancement, hindering their access to higher political positions. Survey data from a study conducted by Support to electoral reforms in North Macedonia (2022) in North Macedonia, reveals that 61 percent of respondents believe women face a

more challenging path to attaining such positions, citing reasons such as women's family obligations and work, insufficient support from men in party leadership, and internal party dynamics (see Kassa 2015, Htun & Weldon, 2012, etc). These findings are consistent with respondents' ranking of barriers to women's political participation. Women candidates in focus groups unanimously express dissatisfaction with the current representation of women in politics, attributing any progress to legislated nominative quotas rather than genuine systemic change (Dahlerup 2013, Franceschet and Piscopo 2008). The current research highlights the disproportionate burden of domestic work on women, which limits their time and availability for political engagement, thereby perpetuating the dominance of men in political spheres (Bashevkin, 1998). Furthermore, women candidates argue that there is a lack of political will among men in parties to support and nominate women for higher positions, as men struggle to cede power and accept women in leadership roles (Matland, 2005).

I.2. Institutional barriers

Institutional barriers is another factor that plays a significant role in shaping women's access to political leadership roles. These constraints encompass various factors, including political systems characterized by rigid schedules that fail to accommodate women's domestic responsibilities, as well as the nature of electoral quotas utilized, if any (Mlambo et al., 2019). The adoption of new electoral or party rules may present opportunities for women's increased participation in politics. However, Celis et al. 2014 argue that the lack of adequate support structures to reform existing codified institutions hampers efforts to promote gender equality in global politics. Political parties, often entrenched in patriarchal structures and driven by self-interest, resist reforms that could threaten their political support and power. Their opposition to change may stem from a fear of losing control, perpetuating a cycle of resistance to gender-inclusive policies. Furthermore, institutional inertia and a reliance on traditional leadership dynamics hinder progress towards gender parity in political representation. In many cases, political leaders exert significant influence over party members, often resulting in blind conformity rather than critical engagement with issues of gender equality and political reform. Thus, addressing institutional barriers requires not only policy reforms but also a fundamental shift in political culture towards greater inclusivity and accountability.

I.3. Economic Impediments

The socio-economic status of women plays a pivotal role in determining their level of participation and representation in political decision-making bodies. Research by Kassa (2015) underscores the significance of economic empowerment in enhancing women's engagement in politics. However, as noted by Suda (1996) and cited in Karuru (2001), women often lack the necessary economic foundation to actively participate in politics. One major obstacle is the persistent gender wage gap, which limits women's economic resources and thus their ability to engage in political activities. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2020), women globally earn only 63% of what men earn, highlighting a significant disparity that restricts their financial independence and political empowerment. Additionally, women often bear a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, including childcare and household chores, which can constrain their time and energy available for political engagement. The United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report (2020) emphasizes that unequal distribution of unpaid care work perpetuates gender inequalities and impedes women's participation in decision-making processes. The high costs associated with political campaigning present another significant barrier for women, further exacerbated by the lack of financial resources available to them (Lawless and Fox 2005). Independent funding mechanisms and regulations to limit campaign spending could provide critical support to women seeking to overcome these economic barriers to political participation.

II. The impact of legislated gender quotas

III. Political quotas for women, commonly known as gender quotas, have emerged as a widely implemented mechanism to enhance women's representation in political spheres. Krook et al. (2009) outline three primary types of political quotas in practice: reserved seats, candidate quotas, and political party quotas. Evidence suggests that countries with political quotas witness a substantial increase in female political representation, with an average of 25.6 percent more women in politics compared to countries without such provisions (Kang and Tripp, 2018). The transformative effects of gender quotas extend beyond mere numerical representation, as highlighted by Liu and Banaszak (2017) and Mastracci (2017). Studies examining the European Parliament indicate that increased representation of women can elevate the overall quality of legislative bodies, fostering better governance, democracy, and attention to social justice (see Aldrich & Daniel 2020, Esarey & Schwindt-Bayer 2017). Furthermore, political quotas influence not only the representation

of women but also reshape political parties, networks, and institutional norms (Barnes & Holman 2020, O'Brien & Rickne 2016). In regions like the Middle East, electoral quotas challenge traditional gender norms and contribute to the substantive representation of women in politics, albeit facing cultural barriers. Similarly, in Singapore, the implementation of gender quotas has led to a significant increase in women's representation in parliament, transforming perceptions of women's credibility and electability (Tan 2015, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance). While existing research underscores the transformative effects of gender quotas, there remains a need for deeper exploration into the underlying mechanisms driving these transformations and a greater incorporation of women's lived experiences into scholarly analyses. This would enhance our understanding of the nuanced dynamics of gender quotas' impact on political institutions and societal change. The effectiveness of affirmative measures beyond quotas

Diversifying the recruitment process in political spheres offers numerous interventions aimed at enhancing gender equality in elected office. This necessitates a closer examination of various strategies globally implemented to address the under-representation of women in political life. Civil society actors play a crucial role in this endeavor, focusing primarily on transitioning potential candidates from eligibility to aspiration and from candidacy to elected positions (Krook and Norris, 2014). To bridge this gap, civil society groups engage in awareness-raising campaigns, recruit, and train potential female candidates, as well as initiate fund-raising events to sustain women's political campaigns (Evans 2011, Tan 2015). These initiatives are instrumental in reshaping public attitudes towards women in politics and combating traditional gender stereotypes that hinder women's political participation. Media campaigns, such as those conducted in the Czech Republic and Turkey, challenge the prevailing lack of gender balance in politics and advocate for increased female representation (Krook and Norris, 2014). Furthermore, data generation by university research centers and international organizations raises awareness about women's exclusion in politics and holds parties accountable for their nomination practices (Krook and Mackay, 2011). Recruitment initiatives organized by civil society organizations, like the 2012 Project and Running Start, target women of different age groups and backgrounds, encouraging them to consider a political career and providing them with the necessary resources and training to succeed (Krook and Norris, 2014). Additionally, capacity-building programs and fund-raising networks ensure that women have the skills and financial resources to run effective campaigns and compete on a level playing field with their male counterparts (Krook and Norris, 2014). Overall, civil society actors play a pivotal role in

catalyzing cultural transformation and providing practical solutions to enhance women's representation and participation in politics.

The political context of North Macedonia

The Republic of North Macedonia, after its independence in 1991 and its membership in relevant regional and international organizations, along with other processes that took place in the first decades of the country's transition, slowly took the first state actions towards gender equality in general and the representation of women in politics in particular. It furthermore established gender equality as one of its policy priorities. Taking into account that the country had just emerged from a federalist and communist state system and was in the first phases of the formation of an independent and unitary state, that would be known as the Republic of Macedonia, the steps towards improving the status of women in public life and consequently the achievement of a higher level of gender equality at the state level were certainly slow.

The Global Gender Gap Report (2022) ranks the Republic of North Macedonia in the 69th position in the global index and in the 47th position in the ranking for political empowerment. Compared to the 2018 Global Gender Gap Report, where the country was ranked 66th in the global index and 45th in the political empowerment ranking, North Macedonia marks an overall rise in the global gender gap index, but the same cannot be said about the political empowerment of women. A marked increase in political empowerment can be seen in the period up to 2018. The 2014 report places North Macedonia in the 70th position in the global index and in the 63rd position in the political empowerment ranking. This outcome comes as a result of the increase in the number of women MPs after the 2017 parliamentary elections.

Gender equality between men and women in the Republic of North Macedonia, in addition to individual laws, is also guaranteed by the highest legal act, the Constitution approved in 1991. The first part of this document, which is entitled *Freedom and civil and political rights* of the chapter *Freedom and fundamental rights of man and citizen* in article 9 postulates:

“Citizens of the Republic of Macedonia are equal in freedoms and rights regardless of gender, race, skin color, national and social origin, political and religious belief, property and social position. Citizens are equal before the Constitution and the laws”

At the international level, the Republic of North Macedonia has adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) by act of succession in 1994 as an integral part of its legal system. In the final concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of the Republic of North Macedonia on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination of 2018, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women welcomes the positive aspects and the progress achieved against the preliminary report, and specifically emphasizes "the amendment of Article 64 of the Electoral Code, which introduces a quota of 40% for the participation of the less represented gender in the electoral lists of political parties for elections to the Assembly and Municipal Councils, in 2015" (UN Women, n.d.). On the other hand, among other things, the Committee recommends that the State should ensure that the Convention is implemented by public authorities, in all sectors and at all levels, in legislation and policies and in judicial decisions; to strengthen the capacity and decision-making authority of the Department for equal opportunities within the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, and to consider its elevation to the ministerial level so that it operates as a national machinery for the advancement of women.

In the part of observations devoted to participation in political and public life, the main concern of the Committee is that "women are still underrepresented in the Assembly, in the government and municipal councils, among the mayors of municipalities, in decision-making positions of foreign policy and in the judiciary"(UN Women, n.d.). For this purpose, among other things, the Committee recommends to North Macedonia that, within the Electoral Code, expands the use of quotas for the election of mayors at the local level; adopt targeted measures, including temporary special measures, such as gender parity system, for accelerated recruitment and appointment of women to decision-making positions in public administration, including diplomatic services.

Government policies towards increasing women's political representation from 1991 to the present

The policies for increasing the political representation of women in North Macedonia after the country's independence include several actions that are reflected through the establishment of quotas within political parties, the design of the electoral system, the establishment of the quota system within the Electoral Code, the approval of The Law for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, as well as the response to the requirements of the provisions of international documents, including the process towards the country's membership in the European Union.

In the three election rounds of the general elections of 1991, 1994 and 1998, the representation of women as Members of Parliament was 6,

5 and 4, respectively, which reflected the country's extreme unwillingness to involve women in politics. Given this trend, both women's non-governmental organizations in the civil sector and European political parties, including some of the country's predominantly left-wing political parties, pledged to advocate for voluntary quotas. These quotas aimed to encourage greater participation of women within the political parties and subsequently enhance their representation in decision-making bodies. In certain European countries, these quotas demonstrated considerable success. The anticipation, contingent upon approval by the largest parties in the country, was an augmentation in women's representation within the nation's political sphere. This initiative was not received with enthusiasm by the political parties, whose internal composition reflected a very large percentage of male-dominated membership. Their reasoning was that the establishment of a system of intra-party quotas would favor women only on the basis of gender, leading to a solution that in essence is discriminatory. Along similar lines, a number of active women of the time considered that such approach would have placed women in a position where they would be perceived as less capable by their male colleagues (International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), (n.d.).

Three political parties of the country accepted the voluntary political quotas, namely the Social-Democratic League of Macedonia, the Liberal-Democratic Party and the Liberal Party, which set a percentage for the participation of women members of the respective parties in the decision-making bodies of the party, as well as the representation of women in election lists. Such development brought to the surface the existence of the issue of underrepresentation of women within political parties and in state decision-making bodies. At the same time, it helped create paths and greater space for women within these political parties, to not only highlight but also have greater agency to work and find suitable solutions about the salient needs of women in the society. However, the stark reality is that since the majority of political parties disregarded the implementation of these quotas, the impact was limited. This is evident from the outcomes of the 1998 parliamentary elections, during which only nine women secured parliamentary seats, highlighting the minimal influence of the three political parties that endorsed the quotas.

The Republic of North Macedonia, following the example of the largest number of European countries, has adopted the proportional electoral system for the election of members in the highest legislative body in the country, the Parliament, as well as councilors in municipal councils at the local level, which has been applied since 2002. On the other hand, the Electoral Code stipulates that in the elections for mayors of municipalities and presidents of the state, the majority election system

is applied. Practice has proven that in most countries employing the proportional system, the representation of women in elected bodies is typically higher compared to those under majority or mixed system. It was the establishment of the proportional electoral system with closed electoral lists that greatly influenced the political representation of women in parliament and municipal councils.

Introducing the system of legally mandate gender quotas in North Macedonia

The legally mandated gender quota system in the Republic of North Macedonia was established in 2002 through the approval of the Law on the Election of Parliament Members of the Republic of Macedonia. This initiative was a response to commitments made at the Beijing Conference of 1995, international pressure from organizations, and obligations stemming from the country's stabilization-association process with the European Union. Its aim was to enhance gender representation in the nation's highest legislative body. The legal provision, article 37 paragraph 3 of this law provides that "in the electoral list, each gender will be represented by at least 30%". For any possible non-compliance with this legal provision on the part of the submitter of the list, the law provided a deadline for the omissions of any irregularities found. In case the submitters of the lists do remove the irregularities found within the deadline provided in article 44 paragraph (2) of this law, the submitted list (the Electoral Commission) will be discarded by a decision". This provision made it possible to leave no room for misuse by political parties (Electoral Code, 2023). The State Electoral Commission is responsible for identifying irregularities, particularly instances where political parties fail to meet the legal requirement of including at least 30% representation of women on their candidate lists. If these discrepancies are not rectified within the designated legal timeframe, the list is disregarded, and the respective political party is disqualified from participating in the election.

This law was a great step forward and was serving as a "compulsory incentive" for political parties to include 30% women in their candidate lists. This did not mean, however, that the inclusion of women would automatically reach 30% in the Assembly. The parliamentary elections of 2002 resulted in 22 women or 18% of the total of 120 parliamentary seats in the assembly of North Macedonia. The 'gap' that the political parties noticed and exploited in these elections was the fact that this legal provision did not require the submitters of the electoral lists to maintain a certain order of both gender within the electoral lists, but only required a minimum of 30% of women. Although the placement of this quota represented an opportunity for a greater number of women

to be included in electoral lists, in order for them to actually get elected, they had to be placed on higher positions within the candidate lists. Political parties in the general elections of that year fulfilled this legal obligation, indeed, but placed women mostly at the bottom of their list (only 4.5% of women were positioned in the first five positions of the candidate lists in the 2002 elections). This positioning, in a country which uses the proportional electoral system with closed lists, failed to increase the number of elected women sufficiently to reach the critical mass of 30%. Despite the latter, the establishment of the quota system definitely justified its existence (compared to the general preliminary elections), since the number of women in the parliament doubled, and for the first time the first Albanian and Turkish women were elected as Members of Parliament.

Furthermore, during this term, the first female vice president of the parliament was elected, signaling a genuine commitment and concerted efforts towards achieving adequate representation of women in politics.

The year 2006 marked the next electoral round, which was accompanied by the adoption of the Electoral Code, which superseded the system of gender quotas contained in the Law on the Election of Parliament Members. Article 64 paragraph 5 of the Electoral Code provides: "In the list submitted for candidates for MPs of paragraph (2) of this article and for members of the council of the municipality and the city of Skopje from paragraph (3) of this article, in every third position of the list, at least one seat belongs to the less represented gender." In case of non-compliance with this legal provision, the Electoral Code, as well as the Law on the Election of MPs of 2002, provides for sanctions by the State Electoral Commission, namely the Municipal Electoral Commission, in Article 67 paragraph 4: "If the state commission, respectively the municipal electoral commission, respectively the electoral commission of the city of Skopje certifies that the lists were not submitted on time, respectively irregularities or omissions were found, and the submitters of the lists did not remove them within the deadline defined in paragraph (2) of this article, the submitted list will be discarded with a decision within 24 hours from the acceptance of the lists."

This legal solution in the Electoral Code forced the political parties not only to include 30% of women in the candidate lists but ensured that they were positioned in every third position within the candidate lists. Consequently, the parliamentary elections of 2006 resulted in a greater number of women MPs. 35 of the total number of MPs were women. With this, the target of 30% women representation at the legislative body was successfully met. The fulfilment of this percentage allowed women to count as an effective interest group that may demand even greater representation, as well as have more

significant impact on decision-making.

It is indisputable that in our country legal gender quotas gave their effect in increasing the number of women in the highest legislative body. Voluntary quotas within political parties lacked widespread support and, even among the few parties that adopted them, failed to significantly increase women's representation in politics. This underscores the importance of legal gender quotas, which has become crucial for the country's transition from a position of minimal representation to significant progress.

Nevertheless, achieving adequate political representation for women requires more than just their presence in the legislative body, even though it is one of the three key branches of state power. At the executive level, the situation with women's representation is grimmer. In these 30 plus years of democracy, women politicians in the Republic of North Macedonia have never been represented with more than 3 or 4 ministerial positions in all governments. Furthermore, the ministerial departments they have led, especially in the first governmental cabinets, typically had no significant political weight. Despite expectations that reaching the critical threshold of 30% women in the assembly would prompt an increase in the number of women holding ministerial positions in the governmental cabinet, even two decades after the establishment of legal quotas, achieving adequate representation in the top executive branch remains elusive. The situation is even more dramatic at the local level, where even though women are well-represented in municipal councils (thanks to legal quotas), the number of women mayors per election cycle over the years does not exceed the number of 6, even though the number of municipalities in the Republic of North Macedonia is 8,1 plus the city of Skopje.

Certain studies (such as the study conducted by IDEA in 2016) show that the level of representation of women in politics is largely conditioned by the opportunities that the political parties themselves give to women members. Political parties are the "gatekeepers" who prevent or allow opportunities to join, run and be elected or appointed to certain decision-making positions (central or local). Intra-party democracy, the will and desire to respect and give women the opportunity to have access to decision-making positions plays a decisive role in the political representation of women in executive bodies. The percentage of women in party bodies, including the main intra-party decision-making bodies, their positioning within these bodies, the way nominations are made, the ranking of candidates, the existence of voluntary quotas in the political party, are highly important for the representation of women in decision-making bodies in the state system.

The social perception of women in the country, but also in the Balkans, is guided by patriarchal norms for the role of women in society,

and this reflects in a similar perception by the leaders of political parties in the selection process. As it was said, voluntary quotas of political parties have been approved by some parties since the 90s, and although this did not have a great impact on the representation of women in state decision-making bodies, in some parties it had an impact on intra-party reforms such as in the Social Democratic League of Macedonia, where the percentage of women in the highest party bodies rose to 30%. The legal anti-discrimination provision in the Law on Political Parties obliges political parties to include this principle in their statutes and party programs. Most of the largest parliamentary parties in the country have provisions for women's representation in their statutes, however their implementation in practice falls short of expectations.

Taking into account the sanctions that came from the state or municipal electoral commission in case of non-compliance with the legal provision, the adoption of legal gender quotas had a decisive influence on the nomination and election of women candidates in the lists of candidates for parliamentary and local elections. However, the appointment of women to higher decision-making positions remained at the mercy of the political elites and their goals and interests.

Conclusion

The Republic of North Macedonia has made a progressive journey these three decades since independence in terms of advancing the position of women and their representation in public and political life. It is evident that currently the country has a strong representation of women in the parliament with 51 out of a total of 120 being women, accounting for 42.5%. This is a promising statistics raises hopes that parity can be achieved in the coming years in the highest legislative body.

Unfortunately, the representation of women in the executive power, and especially in the positions of mayors, has been far from decent for years, despite the 2018 recommendations of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women for the establishment of gender quotas in the election of mayors of municipalities (UN Women, n.d.). Based on the suggestions of this Committee, as well as the general course of the approximation of the country's legislation with that of the European Union, recently, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy has prepared a Proposal-law for legal equality, which foresees the establishment of positive measures which, under the same legal conditions, and depending on the factual inequality, propose to give priority to women and men, up until a balanced participation is fully achieved. Within these specific positive measures, the following are foreseen: the establishment of quotas for achieving the balanced participation of women and men in all bodies and

at all levels in the legislative, executive and judicial power branches, local self-government bodies, institutions and other public services, in leading and executive bodies in public enterprises, in political parties, political commissions and councils, as well as in bodies that represent the state at the international level. The approval and implementation of this proposed law by the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia would undoubtedly make a substantial contribution to enhancing the political representation of women in the country. As indicated by the discussion section above, while progress has been made, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of existing measures and initiatives. Gender quotas alone may not address all barriers to women's political participation, especially the ones related to cultural and social biases that persist within a society like that of North Macedonia, with heavy patriarchalist values. Hence further research and policy interventions are needed to create a more inclusive and equitable political environment.

Moving forward, it is essential to continue monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of existing policies and initiatives, while also exploring new strategies to promote women's political empowerment. This includes addressing cultural and societal norms that perpetuate gender inequalities, as well as providing support and resources to women candidates and elected officials.

In conclusion, achieving gender-balanced political representation requires sustained efforts from policymakers, civil society actors, researchers, and other stakeholders. By collaborating and prioritizing gender equality in political decision-making, North Macedonia can further advance towards a more inclusive and democratic society.

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