

Women in local politics: threats and opportunities

Key-note at the annual conference of FemCities, Women in Political Decision-making positions at the local level, 17-18 November, Luxembourg.

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Thank you for the invitation to speak here at the annual conference of FemCities. This conference on Women in Political Decision Making is ofcourse very timely given what happened last week in the USA.



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For the first time in history a woman was very close to acquiring the most powerful political position in a country. And not just in A country, but in the United States of America, one of the very few players in the international world order.

However, she did not succeed in breaking through the highest glass ceiling. Of course we have to wait for more in-depth analyses of the election results, but for all of us who have followed the campaign it is already christal clear that sexism / resistance to women's political leadership is one of the explanatory factors of Clinton losing the election. And not only this, given the statements of the president elect, Donald Trump, in his campaign, we can even expect a backlash in the next few years with regard to gender equality. And I am afraid that this could be the case in many more established democracies. The popularity of the far right, the call of fundamentalists for a revival of traditional family values is a threat to what was

obtained in the previous decades with regard to equal opportunities and individual choices. Now more than ever it is important to address the on-going under-representation of women in politics as well as in other sectors, because the American election was again an example that reaching gender balance in politics is not just a matter of time.

In my talk this morning I will address the following:

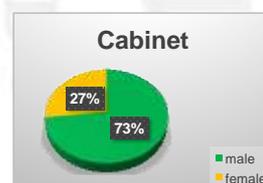
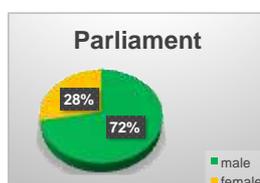
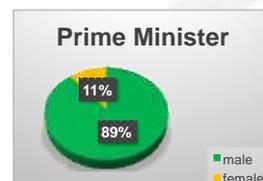
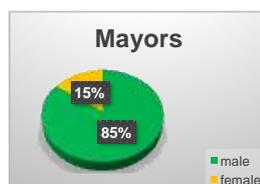
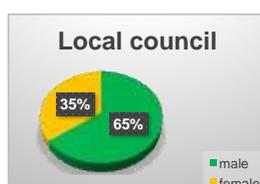
- Some general trends regarding the overall underrepresentation of women politics;
- The current situation at the national and local level in Europe
- Explanations for the underrepresentation of women in local politics: in general and I discuss the case of the Netherlands.
- The media as an obstacle for women's political leadership
- And I finish with an optimistic note, the election of women as mayors of several large cities.

2. General trends

Let me start by saying that we, women, have come a long way.

We have to realise that in the old European democracies, political life with its institutional norms and practices, was established before women gained access to it. And for a long time, an all-male political leadership was taken for granted, and the few women in politics were strangers in a male order. Since then we have witnessed a gradual increase in the number of women cabinet ministers, legislators, mayors and local councillors. However only in a very few cases we find gender balanced political institutions. Despite substantial advancement in women's social and economic status, politics in the established democracies is still male dominated, both at the local as well as at the national level.

EU countries: political representation



Here we see the latest figures from the EU database on women in decision making positions. Starting with the political level we are discussing today we find 35 percent women councillors and only 15 percent women mayors. For the national level there are 10 percent women prime ministers, only three out of 28, 27 percent women cabinet ministers and 28 percent women legislators.

Gender balance in politics seems still far away in all levels of government: 100 years of women's suffrage has not resulted in equal political representation. Only in a very few cases, and mainly only with regard to cabinet positions, we find equal numbers of women and men. Examples are the Spanish cabinet of 2008 and the French cabinet appointed in 2012. In this context a positive note is that some male politicians now openly declare to be in favour of a gender balanced cabinet. It now has become a campaign issue: I refer to Justin Trudeau from Canada who promised and when he won indeed appointed as many women as men in his cabinet, but also Jeremy Corbyn from the Labour Party in the United Kingdom who announced last week that in his next cabinet he would also opt for gender balance. But in Europe we also witness stagnation and sometimes even drops in women's presence in politics.

For a long time the expectation was that women's political representation would increase gradually through a constant, maybe even irreversible process towards permanent gender balance. But this appeared not to be true. In a world perspective, one-third of the elections to national parliaments in 2010 resulted in a drop in women's representation and in 19 per cent of the elections there is stagnation. Let me give some examples. In Denmark, women's share of the seats in parliament has remained unchanged at 37–39 per cent through five elections between 1998–2011. For the local councils there is stagnation at 26–28 per cent for the period 1989–2005. Germany also experienced stagnation between 1998–2009, resulting in a stable and disappointing 31–33 per cent women in the *Bundestag*. And in my own country, the Netherlands, the local level shows hardly any progress since 1990 with only 25–27 per cent of councillors being women.

Why women in the 21st century are not participating in political decision making on equal terms with men has fascinated scholars for more than 40 years. Given the large amount of empirical research we know now that:

- at country level, *institutions* matter, such as electoral systems and party systems. For example in countries with an electoral system that includes legislative gender quotas we find high percentages of women legislators; that *social and economic conditions* of women matter: like women's position on the labour market and in the educational system, but also the conditions for balancing work-life and that *cultural indicators* matter, like religion and general attitude towards gender equality;
- at party level, that *party ideology* is important with leftist parties being more favourable to women in top positions than the more right-wing parties; that the presence of strong *women's sections* helps women to gain access and that certain *recruitment and selection processes* are more favourable to women;
- at the individual level, that a *support structure* and the feeling of *personal impact*, as well as individual *ambitions* matter;
- at the level of society, that the dominant as well as the specific discourses on women as politicians are important. How the *media* for example frame women's political leadership may have a large impact on the chances of those women not only to become elected, but also to succeed as mayor or cabinet minister!

Each of us can use this analytical framework for explaining the specific situation in her own country. It is clear however that for each case impact and interaction varies and that no single indicator can explain either very low or very high levels of women politicians.

Let us now look more closely to the local level, women in the local councils and women as mayors.

The Numbers: Women in local politics

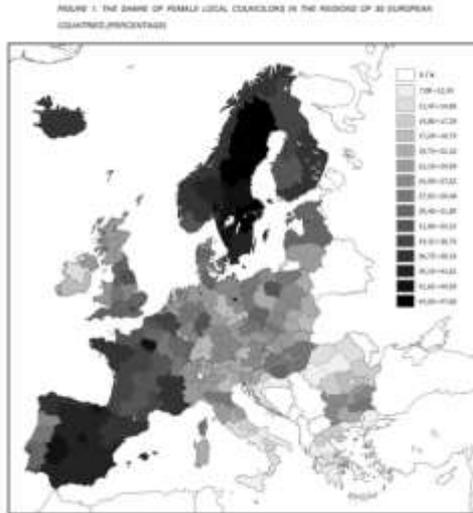
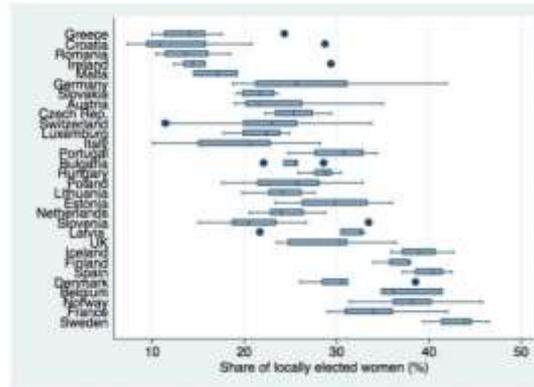


FIGURE 2. BOXPLOT OF THE SHARE OF FEMALE LOCAL COUNCILORS IN THE REGIONS OF 30 EUROPEAN COUNTRIES (PERCENTAGE)



Sundström, A. – Women's local representation within 30 European Countries (2013)

Among the EU Member States the number in the local councils varies between 18 percent in Greece and Cyprus to more than 30 percent in ten countries with Sweden and France at the top, with 44 and 40 percent women councillors. Overall a picture that is not very different from that of the representation of women in the legislatures. However the share of women mayors is disappointing, this varies much more and ranges from 0 percent in Cyprus to 37 in Sweden. In 18 of the 28 EU countries the percentage of women mayors is less than 15 percent.

Most theories about level of decision-making and gender representation tell us to expect a higher representation of women at the local level than at the national level. This is because local policy areas are of particular concern to women and local politics is viewed as more women-friendly because of its proximity to work and home. Furthermore compared to legislative or ministerial office, competition for local office is supposed to be less fierce. Male party leaders are more willing to make room for new candidates, among which women.

However using the EU database women in decision making we see a different pattern: in 8 countries the share of women in the local councils is indeed higher (2 percent or more), but in 11 countries the percentage of women councillors is lower than in the parliament. In four countries the difference is even quite large: France with 26 percent of women MPs and 40 percent of women councillors; Latvia with 16 percent MPs and 31 percent councillors and Hungary with 10 percent women MPs and 30 percent women councillors. The fourth country is my own, the Netherlands, but here we see the reversed picture: a much higher share for

women in the parliament than in the local councils. I already mentioned it: since 1990 the share of women in the councils has stagnated. In 1990 it was 25 percent and now it is 27, so hardly any increase in almost thirty years.

In order to understand the situation in your own country, let me say a few things about the reasons for the Dutch stagnation.

First, the Christian Democratic Party dominates local politics, a party less inclined to select women than the more secular parties. Second, the majority of Dutch local communities are in rural areas, where the effects of the new women's movement on gender roles have been less pronounced than in the larger cities. We still find a strong correlation between the size of the local community and the percentage of women councillors, with the percentage higher in the larger cities. Third, the party system at local level is more fragmented, resulting in many different parties which win only a few seats. As women candidates are often placed lower on the lists, fragmentation is disadvantageous to their chance of election. Fourth, the merging of local communities into larger ones has had a negative effect on the selection of women, because local party organizations also had to merge. And this means that more local party activists are competing for fewer positions which often turns out negatively for women. Fifth, it is often the national party executive that actively promotes the selection of women, but they have very little say in the actual candidate selection process for the councils. Sixth, over time local, independent, parties that participate only in the election in one municipality have gained influence. Local lists tend to nominate fewer women for councils than the nationally-based local parties, because they have neither women's sections nor a tradition of affirmative action for women. A final reason is a shortage in the availability of women candidates. From a survey among local councillors we learn that relatively more female than male councillors quit their job or decide not to stand for re-election. Reasons are that the councilwork is too time-consuming and not rewarding enough. At the start women are enthusiastic, they have concrete ideas and willing to enter local politics in order to get some things done. But during their first term as councillor many of them become disappointed in what they actually can get done.

All these reasons explain the meagre share of women councillors. Help from the government, for example training programs or subsidies for parties who recruit women as candidates, has not resulted in a substantial greater share.

Turning to all European countries again, recent cross-national studies of local councils come up with even more specific explanations for the underrepresentation of women at the local political level. Let me mention three: election aversion, corruption, and the role of the media. Before I discuss these factors let's take a closer look at women as mayors, as city leaders.

Mayors

While the position of councillor is an elected position in all of our countries, we find an abundance of city leadership models across Europe, depending on history and political culture. In some countries the mayor is the person who is head of the largest party in the council, he or she can be directly elected or appointed by the central government. Not only the selection varies over Europe, but also the degree of power and autonomy of mayors. In the context of this talk we cannot discuss all different models, but what mayors do have in common is that for the public, the population, he or she is the most well-known local politician and viewed as an important local political leader.

The overall share of women mayors is 15 percent which is well below the other political offices.

Apart from the more general obstacles, recent cross-national research of local councils in 18 European countries shows that the level of corruption is relevant: in communities where levels of corruption are high, the number of women elected is low. Corruption indicates the existence of all kinds of arrangements that benefit the already privileged, which in most

countries tend to be men (Sundstrom & Wangnerud, 2016). The authors of this study, Sundstrom & Wangerud argue that the advancement of women in local politics is dependent on uncorrupt institutions that signal that women who come forward will receive equal treatment. The second study I mention here focuses not so much on the chances to be elected, but on the question of candidate emergence. The authors, Kristin Kanthak and Jonathan Woon from the University of Pittsburgh, USA (2015) conducted an experimental study and found that women are more election averse than men. The fact that representatives are chosen through elections is enough to dissuade women from putting themselves as candidates. The authors argue that election aversion may have to do with feelings of trust and honesty: a lack of trust in others to campaign honestly; a lack of trust in the accuracy of the electoral system to select the best representative or an unwillingness to lie in the campaign or to constantly say that you are the best! So women candidates more often than men want to serve only in an uncorrupt environment. Furthermore they still feel uncomfortable with campaigning. If there are potential candidates present I would like to hear from you whether you recognise this.

The third study deals with the media and how the media portrays women political leaders. Donatella Campus from the University of Bologna wrote a very important book on media, gender and political leadership (*Women, Political Leaders and the Media*, 2013). Her study shows us how media coverage reinforces gender stereotyping and influences the public evaluations of women leaders' candidacies and performance. These days the media is a dominant factor in politics. The media not only selects the news and determines the political agenda in this way, they also frame the news and make or break individual politicians. The constant attention of the media is a big challenge for today's political leaders and it appears for women to be so even more. Although the amount of news coverage is about the same for women and men political leaders, the scope still differs. Campus shows that women political leaders receive more coverage regarding their physical appearance, personal characteristics and family, than about their political experience, knowledge and policies. She talks about the double bind that women political leaders are confronted with.

Women political leaders and the media

The **double bind** of women political leaders:

A *double bind* is an emotionally distressing dilemma in communication in which an individual (or group) receives two or more conflicting messages, and one message negates the other.

Effects of mediatisation and personalisation:

- Simple messages: one-liners
- Appearances in entertainment shows:
 - the need to be 'witty'
- A confrontation with another female politician is then described by the media as 'catfights' or as 'screaming bitches'
- Overexcited attention to appearance & clothes



“Take care to look well, because when a male minister is looking tired ‘he works hard’, but when a female minister looks tired, ‘she cannot cope’.”

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If they show their emotional side, they are viewed as unfit for the job; if they hide their emotions, act professionally and do not talk about their families, they are viewed as unsympathetic. When male political leaders speak about their wife and children and their own role as husband and father, they touch upon emotional feelings and are evaluated positively. When female leaders do so, this has a different, negative, connotation. It reminds the public of the fact that she spends most of her time away from her family so she cannot be a good mother and wife. It is for this reason that women political leaders are more reluctant to answer personal questions than male leaders.

Other consequences of the dominant role of the media in politics and of the focus on persons rather than on parties or policies is the preference of journalists for simple, black&white messages, for one-liners. For female political leaders who want to explain their considerations and choices, this is not a simple task. Furthermore women political leaders are now frequently asked to perform in entertainment shows. Advantages are the high ratings and a broader public, but disadvantages are the personal questions and the need to 'be witty'. And thirdly, there is the tendency of the media to describe conflicts among two women politicians as 'catfights' and as 'screaming bitches', while they do not use comparable descriptions for two males debating a political issue.

Many studies show that the press still uses the frame of 'being a woman'. Women political leaders are still asked all the time 'what will change now that a woman is in command'. Surveys among women politicians still show a majority of women who are saying that the press treats them differently from men. And this hasn't changed over time. As Campus also points out, they especially mention the overexcited attention for physical appearance and clothes. One of my respondents, a female cabinet minister, decides, when a journalist tells her she looks so tired, to go to the hairdresser each Friday morning before the cabinet meeting: "Take care to look well, because when a male minister is looking tired 'he works

hard', but when a female minister looks tired, 'she cannot cope'." The lesson is to make time to 'do your hair and your lipstick' because the press is around 24/7!. As for the previous findings, I am curious whether the politicians in our midst recognize this double bind and how they tackle this.

Mayors of large cities

Can cities be feminist? Inside the global rise of female mayors (The Guardian, October 12th 2016)



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In order to conclude on a more positive note, what do we see here. Do you know who they are? Mayors of large cities who have been recently elected. Chiara Appendino was elected this summer as mayor of Turin, she is 32 years old. Virginia Raggi is the mayor of Rome, also elected this year. Both women were candidates for the Five Star Movement Party. In the right upper corner we find Adrina Krnacova, the mayor of Prague since 2014 who represents ANO 2011 also an outsider party. In the left corner there is the picture of Ada Colau, who is the mayor of Barcelona since 2015 for Podemos. In the right corner we find Manuela Carmena elected as mayor of Madrid in 2015. She is a retired lawyer and was a candidate for Ahora Madrid a movement consisting of all types of groups with a radical platform and using new forms of participative democracy.

What do they have in common: they are candidates for so-called outsider, relatively new, parties; several of them get elected because they promise to 'clean up politics', to fight corruption and they pursue issues like banning cars from the centre and improving services. They bring with them a set of experiences different in important ways from those of many of their male colleagues. An example: If you've never tried to put a buggy on a bus, you don't really understand what many women's experience of public transport is.

In short the election of these women as mayors signal a desire for change, something that our established democracies need desperately now that more and

more of our citizens turn their back to traditional politics. As such our failing democratic institutions may create opportunities for a new generation of political leaders, for agents of change: women.

Thank you!

Women Mayors

Capital Cities Led by Women

- Bucharest: Social Democratic Party
 - Rome: 5 star Movement
 - Luxembourg City: Democratic Party
 - Warsaw: Civic Platform
 - Sofia: GERB
 - Prague: ANO 2011
 - Paris: Socialist Party
 - Oslo: Socialist Left Party
 - Madrid: Ahora Madrid
 - Stockholm: Social Democrats
- Outsider, relatively new, parties;
 - 'Clean up politics' – ticket
 - Radical platform
- **Source:** CESifo group Munich – Women and men in decision-making positions (2015)

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