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Summary of the report

Jämställdhet på lokal nivå?

En analys av andelen lokalt valda kvinnor inom EU:s medlemsstater

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Women's political representation on the local level

Various Swedish policy areas aim to achieve equal levels of representation between women and men in political assemblies. The EU also has an explicit purpose to work in favour of increasing the presence of women in decision-making institutions.

While the state of research portrays a well-developed image of how the share of women in national parliaments varies over time and in between countries, there is relatively little comparative research on women's representation on local level in Europe, i.e. institutions equivalent to Swedish *kommunfullmäktige*. Comparative studies of women's political representation has seldom focused on local assemblies in the EU member states. One reason is the scarce supply of data. This can be perceived as a fundamental problem for our understanding of gender equality in local institutions – here understood as the share of locally elected women. As a consequence, this diminishes our understanding of a question that has a big influence on the everyday life of European citizens.

In light of the fact that there are surprisingly few comparative studies focusing on the share of locally elected women – between countries as well as within countries – the highly descriptive character of this report makes up a valuable contribution of women's political representation in EU Member States. Up until now it has

been unclear as to which extent women are underrepresented on the local level, whether their presence increases and what could possibly explain a high presence of women in some European regions. Therefore, the report provides a key basis for understanding how men's dominating presence in political life can change.

Research questions and studied countries

The purpose of the report is to provide a review of the numerical equality in local assemblies in 27 EU Member States (Cyprus is not included in the investigation). A review of this comprehension in this field has hitherto not been published. Data describing the situation in 277 regions in the 27 countries has been gathered – with the latest available numbers – as well as tendencies over time in 14 of these countries. These data give the possibility to answer three questions: 1) To what extent are women underrepresented in local assemblies in EU Member States? 2) Does the share of locally elected women increase in Europe? 3) What explains the higher share of locally elected women in certain regions?

Despite positive trends, a long way to go

This report shows that local assemblies in the European Union still have a long way to reach full equality, in spite of positive trends. Only in very few places do women hold close to half of the locally eligible seats – it is a matter of a handful of regions. This is most apparent in regions in Croatia and Greece, where the share of locally elected men is often higher than 80 percent.

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Even Denmark and Netherlands, perceived as among the most equal countries in the world, have a long way to reach numerically equal gender distribution on a local level.

These numbers also highlight the differences in equality *within* the countries, a variation that has seldom been studied. We can see that even in countries with a high GDP per capita – such as Italy, Germany and Austria – there are still regions where on average women hold less than a fifth of the seats in locally elected assemblies.

Therefore, at large, this analysis highlights that the situation in the 27 examined EU countries still does not reach the goal of equal representation between women and men in the political sphere, as it was formulated more than two decades ago in *the Beijing Platform for Action* (United Nations 1995).

For the 14 countries where we have figures over time the report shows the development of the share of women's local political presence. This provides an image which has never been presented in a compiled format. Judging by the numbers there is clearly an increase in the share of women representatives, but the tendency is not consistent. For example, there are regions in many countries where progress stands still, and various countries only display marginal progress over time.

What explains the regional variation?

The question is why certain regions have a higher share of locally elected women. In the report, the data are studied on the basis of a number of hypotheses that research holds as important conditions for a high share of locally elected women. They cover explanatory variables on a national level (e.g. type of electoral system, the time of the introduction of women's right to vote, whether the form of government is federal or not) as well as explanatory variables on a subnational level (e.g.

degree of urbanization, support for left-wing parties, the share of women participating in the labour market). Previous case studies provide some insight, although limited, since their aim has not been a systematic comparison of women's local representation within and between a larger number of countries.

The factors that turn out to be important locally, to various degrees, are: support for left-wing parties, the regions' degree of economic development, the share of women participating in the labour market and the degree of urbanization. Most of the variables on the national level do not have explanatory power on the local level, according to this more systematic comparison.

Choosing the right reforms and enhancing the knowledge

One important conclusion is that relying on the passing of time is not enough. In order to help progress, political measures are probably called for. It is for example plausible that reforms facilitating women's entry and presence in the labour market in the long term also would increase the amount of women successfully running for office. What political parties, pressure groups and elected representatives can do to increase the share of locally elected women even more is a highly relevant topic for future discussion.

As mentioned earlier, the most important contribution of this study is factual evidence displaying an image of the situation that has not been systematically examined previously. We now have a view of how low the presence of women representatives on the local level actually is and how it has changed over time.

The report also discusses the risk of erasing nuances within regions when merging regional data. The relatively poor availability of measurement points over time is another limitation. Therefore, the report espe-

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cially points to the need to improve the availability of historical data. There is a big number of EU countries where data is not available over time and where we therefore know basically nothing of how the situation has changed. Consequently, there are good reasons to systematically monitor such figures – as well as including data for more countries – in order to evaluate the direction of the development.

One result that illustrates the importance of nuanced measures is the difference between the national and the local level, as evidenced by this report. Following most of the studies in the research about women's presence in national assemblies, there are institutional reforms that can facilitate the entry of women. Among these are statutory quotas, voluntary quotas to the electoral lists of political parties, reforming the recruitment processes of parties and the importance of proportional electoral systems. However, many of these factors are not supported by the examination in this report – they do not explain the political presence of women on a local level.

More specifically, gender quotas is a matter that would benefit from refined data. According to the descriptive analysis of this report, the Spanish statutory quota of 2008 provides an example of a successful reform. Yet the statistical analysis of a larger number of regions does not support the significance of statutory quotas for women on the subnational level. A possible reason is that such measures are not enforced, that is, that the political parties do not follow the rules. Therefore, a commendable topic for further research would be to study the variation in to what extent statutory quotas are being abided by political parties.

In conclusion, there is need for enhanced knowledge and refined methods. For example, today it is difficult to find established measures that gauge candidate recruitment within parties – and how it differs – within countries and on subnational levels. This sort of nuanced measures could potentially contribute to a more detailed explanation of the large variation regarding the share of locally elected women.