POLITICAL(DIS) EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

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INTRODUCTION

Montenegro is moving ever closer to accession to the European Union and has thereby committed, among other things, to ensuring "effective mechanisms for gender equality in political life. However, the problem lies in the fact that the existence of certain mechanisms does not guarantee their effective implementation, nor does it automatically lead to real, substantive political power for women.

According to the Montenegro Report for 2024,[1] the European Commission notes that women's participation in political life remains low, and that institutional and societal efforts to overcome gender stereotypes are still insufficient.

Despite certain progress - including the introduction of gender quotas in 2011, when it was first prescribed that at least 30% of candidates on electoral lists must be from the less represented gender, and the subsequent improvement of this framework through an increase of the quota to 40% in 2024, women in Montenegro continue to face structural, cultural, and political barriers that limit their full participation.

These barriers are particularly manifested through the inadequate placement of women on electoral lists, their minimal representation in decision-making positions within political parties, as well as increasingly pronounced forms of digital violence that affect women's political motivation and visibility.

In order to address this issue at its very core, it is important to pay attention to all key - even less visible - factors that shape women's political participation, ranging from institutional practices and the normative framework, through party power structures, to deeply rooted social perceptions of women's role in the public sphere. Only by understanding how these factors intertwine can we grasp why formal equality does not translate into substantive equality, and how to design mechanisms that go beyond

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1 European Commission, Montenegro Report 2024.

the mere fulfillment of quotas and contribute to a genuine redistribution of political power.

Accordingly, this report provides a statistical overview of women's representation within the political framework, as well as an analysis of the key barriers women face and the real-life circumstances that shape their ability to actively and equally participate in decision-making processes. Finally, recommendations will be presented for further improving the status of women and strengthening their participation in the political life of Montenegro.

This report is part of the project "Challenging Gender Bias and Enhancing Women's Political Participation in Montenegro through Public Awareness, Capacity-Building Trainings, and Gender Representation Advocacy", implemented by CEMI with the financial support of the Embassy of Canada through the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI).

ABOUT GENDER EQUALITY

It is important to discuss and understand gender equality not only in the context of advocating for the improvement of women's position, but also as a process that includes men, their roles, interests, and contributions. Gender equality is not, nor will it ever be, exclusively a "women's issue," but rather an issue of societal development that requires the active participation of all genders.

Gender equality implies the equal participation of women and men, as well as persons of different gender identities, in all areas of the public and private sectors, equal status and equal opportunities for the exercise of all rights and freedoms, the use of individual knowledge and capacities for societal development, and the equal enjoyment of the benefits resulting from work.[2]

What is particularly important is a clear understanding of *the very essence of gender equality:* put simply, all achievements, opportunities, and possibilities available to women must not depend on their sex or gender - and likewise, the opportunities, choices, and roles of men must not be limited by their sex. Gender equality means that both women and men are freed from traditional stereotypes and are able to participate equally in political, economic, and social life, without pre-imposed roles or expectations.

In the political context, gender equality means that women have equal opportunities to be elected, to make decisions, and to directly participate in the creation of public policies. Representation should not be viewed solely through the number of women in legislative bodies, but also through their actual position within decision-making structures, such as leadership roles within political parties, positions as heads of electoral lists, and roles in which key political agendas and initiatives are shaped.

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2 Website of the Parliament of Montenegro, available at: https://www.skupstina.me/me/gradjani/zene-i-parlament

According to the sex structure, based on the most recent 2023 population census, Montenegro's population consists of 50.80% women and 49.20% men.[3] In a society where women make up more than half of the population yet continue to have limited influence over political decision-making, it is evident that there are shortcomings in the functioning of the democratic system itself. In this context, it is important to first consider Montenegro's legal and strategic framework, which recognizes the achievement of gender equality as one of the key prerequisites for a democratic order and the process of European integration.

The **Constitution of Montenegro,**[4] in Article 18, guarantees equality between women and men, as well as a policy of equal opportunities.

The *Law on Gender Equality5* defines gender equality as the equal status and equal opportunities of women and men in all areas of life, and establishes the obligation of state authorities, local self-government bodies, political entities, and other institutions to actively implement policies that ensure balanced gender representation in decision-making processes.

Meanwhile, the *National Strategy for Gender Equality 2025–20296* recognizes women's political participation as one of the key indicators of democratic development and gender equality in Montenegro. The Strategy emphasizes that the insufficient representation of women in positions of power and decision-making is one of the clearest manifestations of gender inequality, and that addressing this situation requires a multifaceted approach-ranging from strengthening women's leadership and reforming political parties, to promoting gender-sensitive policies and supporting civil society initiatives focused on women's political activism. Particular emphasis is placed on the need for the effective implementation of the existing legal framework, including the *Law on Gender Equality and the Law on the Election of Councillors and Members of Parliament (Official Gazette*

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3 Data source: Statistical Office of Montenegro - MONSTAT
4 Constitution of Montenegro, *Official Gazette of Montenegro,* Nos. 1/2007 and 38/2013, available at: https://www.paragraf.me/propisi-crnegore/ustav-crne-gore.html
5 Law on Gender Equality (Official Gazette of Montenegro, No. 73 of 12 October 2010, No. 40/11, No. 35/15).
6 National Strategy for Gender Equality 2025–2029, available on the Government of Montenegro website: https://www.gov.me/dokumenta/7d1807f5-b4b2-4e7d-9391-546701d7eb2b

of Montenegro, No. 81/25, Amendments of 29 July 2025), which introduce mandatory quotas and mechanisms for the protection of women's mandates.

Additional confirmation of structural challenges in the field of gender equality is provided by the findings of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). In its concluding observations of May 2024, CEDAW welcomed certain progress in legislative reforms, but at the same time pointed to serious shortcomings in the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality, particularly with regard to the absence of sanctions for non-compliance. The Committee emphasized that this is the only law that prescribes clear and legally binding requirements for integrating a gender perspective into all phases of public policy development.[7]

In July 2025, the Government of Montenegro adopted a new National Gender Equality Strategy for the period 2025–2029, accompanied by an Action Plan for 2025–2026.[8] The Strategy sets out ambitious objectives, including the reduction of systemic and structural inequalities, the empowerment of women and girls, the prevention and elimination of gender-based violence, and the integration of the principle of gender equality across all areas of public and private life.

However, in light of the European Commission's findings regarding limited institutional and financial capacities, the Strategy's actual impact will depend on the provision of adequate resources and its consistent implementation in practice.

Another challenge concerns the way gender equality is positioned within public policies. The mid-term evaluation of the implementation of the National Gender Equality Strategy 2021–2025 and the accompanying Action Plan for the period 2023–2024 pointed to a pronounced trend of declining budget allocations for gender equality, as well as its increasingly visible marginalization on the political agenda. Such a trend directly affects insti-

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7 European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document: *Montenegro Report 2024,* accompanying the Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, Brussels, 2024.
8 European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document – Montenegro Report 2025, accompanying the Commission Communication on EU Enlargement Policy 2025, Brussels, 2025, p. 47.

tutional capacities to implement gender-responsive policies and further widens the gap between normative commitments and practice.[9]

The *European Commission's 2025 Report*[10] notes that the legal and institutional framework for gender equality remains incomplete, while the capacities for its implementation are limited due to insufficient financial and human resources, as well as a low level of institutional awareness and commitment in this area.

In order to assess the broader context of gender equality in Montenegro, it is important to rely on composite indicators that enable comparability with European Union countries. In this regard, the Gender Equality Index is of particular importance. In Montenegro, the Index is calculated in accordance with the methodology of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) and is published by the Statistical Office of Montenegro (MONSTAT).

According to the latest available data, *Montenegro's Gender Equality Index for 2023*[11] amounts to 59.3, representing an increase of 4.3 index points compared to 2019. Although this progress indicates certain positive developments, Montenegro still lags significantly behind the European Union average, which stands at 68.6, meaning that Montenegro's score is 9.3 index points lower than the EU average.

An analysis of the individual domains of the Index shows that gender inequalities in Montenegro are most pronounced in the **area of power,** where the index value amounts to only 44.1. This domain encompasses political, economic, and social power, namely the representation of women in decision-making positions in parliament, government, local self-governments, management boards, and other centers of power where women have opportunities to participate in decision-making. This finding clearly indicates that women's political power represents one of the weakest links in the overall gender equality system in Montenegro, despite the existence of formal legal mechanisms, including gender quotas.

9 European Commission, Montenegro Report 2024.
10 European Commission, Montenegro Report 2025, p. 47.
11 MONSTAT, Gender Equality Index in Montenegro, July 2023.

The largest gap in comparison with the EU average is recorded in the **money domain,** where Montenegro lags behind by as much as 20.7 index points, indicating pronounced gender disparities in access to financial resources, earnings, and economic security. On the other hand, the smallest differences compared to the EU average are observed in the **health domain**, where the index stands at 87.9, with only minimal deviation from the EU average.

II

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND (NON-) PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

Women make up 50% of the population of Montenegro, but they do not have 50% of real political power or influence to make decisions that would contribute to the quality of life of all citizens. Numerous countries that have succeeded in increasing women's participation in political life today record visible benefits in terms of the quality of governance and the inclusiveness of public policies.

Examples from several EU countries, such as *Sweden* (45.6%), *Finland* (45.5%), and *Denmark (44.7%)*, show the highest shares of women members of parliament. Compared to the European Union average, Montenegro lags behind in terms of women's representation in parliament, as well as in the stability and manner of implementation of gender quotas. While EU member states reached an average of 33.4% women[12] in 2024, with rapid growth over the past decade, Montenegro has not exceeded 28.4% [13]even 11 years after the introduction of quotas. This indicates that formal mechanisms exist but are not sufficient to ensure substantive political participation of women. This comparison is important because it illustrates how closely Montenegro is approaching the standards of women's political representation expected in its accession process, as well as the level of awareness among its citizens that women are entitled to equal positions in decision-making, rather than merely a symbolic role within formally fulfilled norms.

The European Union Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025[14] identifies gender mainstreaming as one of the key instruments for advancing gender equality, emphasizing that changes in social values and perceptions play

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12 Eurostat. (2025, March 7). 33.4% of parliamentarians across the EU are women. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/edn-20250307-1
13 Equal Future, available at: https://www.equalfuture-eurasia.org/womens-representation-in-politics-and-public-administration/montenegro?utmn
14 European Commission, „*A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025*", Brussels, 2020.

a crucial role in dismantling gender stereotypes. The EU consistently pro-motes the integration of a gender perspective across all stages of public policy design and implementation, recognizing this approach as a corner-stone for building inclusive societies and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

In the context of the enlargement process, candidate countries, including Montenegro, are expected to demonstrate clear and measurable commit-ment to gender equality and the empowerment of women. Aligning national policies with EU principles and Sustainable Development Goal 5 represents not only a normative obligation, but also an important indicator of institutional maturity and readiness for membership.

Additionally, decision-makers in Montenegro are obliged to apply the prin-ciple of gender mainstreaming in public policies, in accordance with Article 3 of the *Law on Gender Equality*,[15] which stipulates that the impact of decisions on the status of women and men must be assessed at all stages of planning, adoption, and implementation. However, although this obligation is clearly defined, it is rarely applied in practice. The lack of a systematic approach to gender mainstreaming in public policies results in the needs and perspectives of women remaining outside the focus of key political processes, which further deepens the gap between the formal legal framework and women's actual political power.

In practice, the absence of systematic gender mainstreaming in public pol-icies means that, in the drafting of laws, strategies and other public doc-uments, the basic question is rarely asked - how the proposed measures will affect women and men differently. Decisions are most often taken from a "gender-neutral" perspective, which in reality frequently assumes male experience as universal. As a result, the specific needs of women- such as their position in the labor market, unpaid care and domestic work, access to public services, health care, or safety in public spaces-remain unrecog-nized or are addressed only partially.

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15 Law on Gender Equality („Sl. list Crne Gore", br. 73/10 od 10.12.2010, 40/11 od 08.08.2011, 35/15 od 07.07.2015)

The lack of gender analyses, gender-sensitive indicators and gender-responsive budgeting further results in gender equality remaining a declarative objective rather than an integrated part of decision-making processes, which in the long term produces policies that not only fail to reduce existing inequalities, but largely reproduce them.

This chapter provides an overview of women's representation at different levels of political decision-making in order to offer a clear insight into the formal scope of their political representation. However, reliance on statistical data alone is not sufficient to fully capture the actual position of women in political life; rather, it is useful in the context of mapping participation and identifying key trends and patterns emerging from political structures themselves. Accordingly, this chapter presents an overview of the state of women's political representation in the following areas: *Parliament; the Government; the local level; and within political parties.*

2.1 POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE PARLIAMENT OF MONTENEGRO

As a key institution of democracy, the parliament shapes society through its legislative and oversight roles. Given this influence, it is important for parliaments to recognize their responsibility in reducing gender inequalities and ensuring equal participation of women and men. The primary duty of members of parliament is to represent citizens - their interests and needs. For this reason, parliament serves as a mirror of the state of society, reflecting its values, priorities, and level of equality and understanding.

In order for the interests and needs of all citizens to be equally represented, it is essential to ensure that both women and men have equal opportunities to contribute to the creation of decisions, policies, and legislation, in line with their knowledge, experience, and expertise. Only such an approach can ensure that parliament truly reflects the diversity of society and adopts decisions that respond to the needs of all.

When it comes to the highest leadership positions in the Parliament of Montenegro, the presence of women remains extremely limited.

To date, the Parliament of Montenegro has been presided over by only two women: Vesna Perović (from 2001 to 2002) and Danijela Đurović (from April 2022 to July 2023).[16] Furthermore, according to publicly available information, since 2011, dr Jelena Borovinić Bojović has been the only woman to hold the *office of president of the Assembly of the Capital City* of Podgorica. She has served two consecutive terms—firstly from April 2023, and subsequently following her re-election in December 2024.[17]

In the positions of *Vice-President of the Parliament,* only two women have been recorded in the last two convocations: Branka Bošnjak, from 2020 to October 2023, and Zdenka Popović, who currently holds this office in the 28th convocation of the Parliament.

Although the number of women in the highest positions of the legislative branch remains very low, the Parliament of Montenegro has developed institutional mechanisms to improve gender equality over the last few decades.

In 2001, the **Committee on Gender Equality** was established as the first national mechanism in this field. Furthermore, amendments to the Rules of Procedure have contributed to better representation of female MPs within working bodies and leadership roles. A significant step forward was also the formation of the **Women's Club of the Parliament** in 2021, which brings together female MPs from various political parties and provides a platform for a unified voice.[18]

In this chapter, we will provide an overview of women's representation in the Parliament of Montenegro across several convocations, with a particular focus on changes in the number and percentage of female MPs at the beginning of and throughout the mandates.

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16 CeMI, Study "Electoral Reform in Montenegro," 2024, p. 46, available at:
https://cemi.org.me/me/post/izborna-reforma-u-crnoj-gori-prijedlozi-za-unapredenje-1178
17Website of the Assembly of the Capital City, available at:
https://starisajtskupstine.podgorica.me/arhiva-saziva/?utm
18 Parliament of Montenegro, *The Importance and Role of Parliament in Achieving Gender Equality* (Welcome Book for New Members of Parliament), 2022, p. 7, publisher: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

The difference between the number of women elected immediately following an election and the number of female MPs serving throughout the parliamentary term is a result of institutional dynamics and the legal mechanism for filling vacant parliamentary seats. For this reason, the analysis presents both indicators: **the representation of women at the start of the term, which reflects the impact of the electoral system and quotas, and representation during the term,** which demonstrates the actual effectiveness of mechanisms designed to protect women's mandates.

Table 1 shows the representation of women in the Parliament of Montenegro according to the final results of the parliamentary elections - specifically, the composition of the Parliament immediately after the elections, prior to any replacements of MPs. These data reflect the direct impact of the electoral process and the legal gender equality mechanisms applied to the electoral lists.

Table 1: Female Representation in Parliament based on Election Results (2012–2023)

Election year	Convocation	Total number of member of parliament	Number of female member of parliament	Percentage of women (%)
2012	25th convocation	81	14	17,0%
2016	26th convocation	81	20	24,7%
2020	27th convocation	81	18	22,2%
2023	28th convocation	81	17	21,0%

Note: The number of female MPs is determined based on the final parliamentary election results - specifically, according to the names of candidates who were awarded mandates in the elections, prior to any replacements during the parliamentary term.

Table 2 illustrates the changes in women's representation within the Parliament of Montenegro throughout the parliamentary terms, with a specific focus on the number of female MPs at the end of a given convocation's mandate. This figure also represents the **highest number of female MPs recorded during a specific term.** Such an outcome is the result of the legal mechanism for filling vacant parliamentary seats. According to this mechanism, if a female MP's mandate is terminated, her seat is taken by

the next female candidate from the same electoral list. Conversely, if a male MP's mandate is terminated, the mandate is awarded to the next candidate on the list, regardless of gender.

Table 2: Representation of Women in the Parliament of Montenegro at the end of the Parliamentary Term (2012–2026).

Parliamentary Convocation	Period	Total number of member of parliament	Number and Percentage of Female MPs at the end of the Term	
25th convocation	2012 -2016	81	19	23,5%
26th convocation	2016-2020	81	27	33,3%
27th convocation	2020-2023	81	23	28,4%
28th convocation	2023- february 2026	81	23	28,4%

*Note: *The 28th Convocation refers to the current number of women as of Feb. 19, 2026.*

The presented data show that statutory quotas in Montenegro have contributed to an increase in the number of women in Parliament, but that they have not, on their own, been sufficient to ensure stable and equal representation of women in the legislative branch. Although quotas formally guarantee the presence of women on electoral lists, the results of parliamentary elections indicate that women are still less frequently elected immediately after elections, while their number more often increases only during the course of the mandate, through the replacement of members of parliament.

In all analyzed parliamentary terms, it is therefore evident that the number of women in Parliament increases during the mandate compared to the initial post-election situation. The most pronounced increase was recorded in the 26th parliamentary term, when the percentage of women MPs reached 33.3% by the end of the mandate. Nevertheless, in no other parliamentary term during the observed period was the target of at least 30% women in Parliament achieved.

The increase in the number of women in the Parliament of Montenegro during the course of the mandate is primarily the result of a legal mechanism that obliges political entities, when filling vacant parliamentary seats, to maintain the prescribed level of representation of the less represented gender. This

mechanism functions as a corrective instrument that partially mitigates the consequences of the unfavorable positioning of women on electoral lists, but it does not fundamentally change the pattern of their underrepresentation at the moment immediately following elections. Consequently, the growth in the number of women MPs during a mandate does not reflect a change in political practices or a more equitable distribution of electoral power but rather points to the limited reach of the existing quota system.

For this reason, the analysis provides a comparative overview of women's representation immediately after elections and during the course of parliamentary mandates, in order to assess how statutory quotas and the mechanisms for their implementation function in practice.

2.1.1 WOMEN IN PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES

In addition to plenary representation, it is crucial to examine the participation of women in the work of the standing committees of the Parliament of Montenegro, as a significant portion of the legislative and oversight process takes place within these bodies. In the current parliamentary convocation, a total of 14 standing committees have been established, while women chair only three.[19]

The following provides an overview of women's representation in the standing working bodies of the Parliament of Montenegro. This analysis aims to highlight not only the formal presence of women in parliamentary committees but also the extent of their involvement in decision-making processes, including committee chairing, participation in leadership structures, and work within thematically influential committees.

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19 Official Website of the Parliament of Montenegro, https://www.skupstina.me/me/radna-tijela

Table 3: Representation of women as chairs of parliamentary committees by convocation (2009–2026).

Parliamentary Convocation	Period	Committees	Number of committees	Political parties
24th convocation	2009 - 2011	*Committes for gender equality*	1	*Democratic party of socialists*
25th convocation	2011 - 2012	*Legislative, committe on education and science and committee for gender equality*	3	*Democratic party of socialists, Social democratic party*
26th convocation	2012 - 2016	*Legislative; committee for gender equality i anticorrruption committee*	3	*Democratic party of sociaalists*
27th convocation	2016 – 2020	*Constitutional; Legislative and gender equality committee*	3	*New serbian democracy; Democratic people's party; United reform action*
28th convocation	2020 - 2023	*Administrative; Constitutional; Legislative; committee of gender equality and committee on education,science and culture*	5	*Europe now movement; New serbian democracy; Democratic party of socialists*

Source: Official Gazette of Montenegro (Decisions on the appointment of chairs and members of parliamentary committees, convocations for the period 2011–2023).

Between 2011 and 2023, women held the positions of chairs in several standing committees of the Parliament of Montenegro across multiple convocations; however, their representation in these positions remains limited and uneven. In most convocations, women's leadership roles were primarily tied to the Gender Equality Committee, as well as certain committees with administrative or legislative mandates. Simultaneously, committees that play a pivotal role in decision-making on security, economic, and foreign policy issues were rarely led by women.

In the 24th convocation, there was only one woman chairing a committee: **Nada Drobnjak** (Gender Equality Committee). In the 25th convocation, the chairs included **Draginja Vuksanović Stanković** (Legislative Committee),

Branka Tanasijević (Committee on Education, Science, Culture and Sports), and **Nada Drobnjak** (Gender Equality Committee).
In the 26th convocation, the chairs were Nada Drobnjak (Gender Equality Committee), **Daliborka Pejović** (Anti-corruption Committee), and **Marta Šće-panović** (Legislative Committee).

In the 27th convocation of the Parliament, the female committee chairs were **Simonida Kordić** (Constitutional Committee), **Maja Vukićević (**Legislative Committee), and **Božena Jelušić** (Gender Equality Committee). During these terms, women presided over a limited number of committees, maintaining a consistent trend of female leadership within the Gender Equality Committee.

In the 28th (current) convocation, the positions are held by: **Jelena Nedović** (Administrative Committee), **Jelena Božović (**Constitutional Committee), and **Jelenka Andrić** (Gender Equality Committee).

Consequently, in the current composition of the standing parliamentary committees, women chair only three out of a total of 15 committees, accounting for approximately 20% of the chairing positions.

A pattern is observed whereby women are more frequently entrusted with leadership positions in committees traditionally perceived as "less politically powerful" or related to "women's issues," while key committees deciding on security, economic, and foreign policy matters remain predominantly under male control. The insufficient participation of women in committee leadership positions thus points to the existence of informal barriers within political structures that affect the distribution of power and responsibility. This further confirms the thesis that formal representation does not necessarily equate to substantive participation in decision-making.

2.2 POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE GOVERNMENT OF MONTENEGRO

Unlike the legislative branch, where gender quotas are legally defined, the political representation of women in the Government of Montenegro depends entirely on the political will of the Prime Minister-designate and coalition agreements. Precisely because of this, the executive branch serves as one of

the clearest indicators of genuine, rather than merely formal, commitment to gender equality.

Table 4: Representation of women in ministerial positions in the Government of Montenegro (2011–2025).

Government Convocation	Period	Total number of female ministers
Government Igora Lukšića	*2011 - 2012*	*2*
Government Mila Đukanovića	*2012 - 2016*	*4*
Government Duška Markovića	*2016 - 2020*	*4*
Government Zdravka Krivokapića	*2020 - 2022*	*4*
Government Dritana Abazovića	*2022 - 2023*	*4*
Government Milojka Spajića	*2023 - 2025*	*7*

Source: Official Website of the Government of Montenegro

Data on the representation of women in the executive branch between 2011 and 2025 indicate a slow, uneven, and long-term limited progress regarding women's participation in ministerial positions. In the first analyzed period (2011–2012), the number of female ministers was exceptionally low, clearly pointing to the marginal role of women in the executive structure of that time. During this period, ministerial functions were held by **Milica Pejanović-Đurišić,** Minister of Defense, and **Suzana Pribilović,** Minister of Public Administration.

In the subsequent three Government convocations (2012–2020), the number of female ministers increased to four and remained stagnant without further growth throughout that period. This continuity suggests an absence of significant changes in the approach to gender representation within the executive branch; it also indicates that the appointment of women to ministerial positions was not accompanied by long-term or systemically grounded measures to improve their representation.

Among them were, again, **Milica Pejanović-Đurišić** (Minister of Defense) and **Suzana Pribilović** (Minister of Public Administration), followed by **Dragica Sekulić** (Minister of Economy), **Marija Vučinović** (Minister without Portfolio), and **Sanja Damjanović** (Minister of Science, 2016–2020).

Additionally, a trend of repeating the same female ministers across multiple consecutive convocations is observed. This may indicate a limited scope for including new women into the executive branch during this period, as well as the lack of a systemic approach to developing a broader base for female political leadership.

Although some progress has been made since 2020—primarily through the appointment of women to portfolios traditionally perceived as strategic and of particular importance—quantitative indicators remain unchanged. In the 2020–2022 period, ministerial functions were held by **Olivera Injac** at the head of the Ministry of Defense, **Jelena Borovinić-Bojović** as Minister of Health, **Vesna Bratić** as Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, and **Tamara Srzentić** as Minister of Public Administration.

In the 2022–2023 period, ministerial functions were held by **Jovana Marović** (Minister of European Affairs), **Maša Vlaović** (Minister of Culture and Media), **Ana Novaković-Đurović** (Minister of Ecology, Spatial Planning and Urbanism), and **Biljana Šćepanović** (Minister of Science and Technological Development).

A more significant shift was recorded after the formation of Milojko Spajić's Government in 2023, when the number of female ministers rose to seven. In this convocation, as well as through subsequent Government reshuffles in 2024 and 2025, ministerial functions were held by **Maida Gorčević** (Minister of European Affairs), **Anđela Jakšić-Stojanović** (Minister of Education and Science), **Naida Nišić** (Minister of Social Welfare), **Tamara Vujović** (Minister of Culture), **Maja Vukićević** (Minister of Transport), **Simonida Kordić** (Minister of Tourism), and **Majda Adžović** (Minister of Public Works). This increase represents the first visible step forward in terms of the numerical representation of women in the Government during the observed period.

However, despite the increased number of female ministers, it is important to emphasize that this shift comes relatively late and after more than a decade of an almost unchanged executive structure. Furthermore, this convocation also sees a continuity of appointing already politically established women, while a clear institutional framework that would enable the systemic inclusion of new actors and the development of a broader base

of female political leadership is still lacking. Therefore, the increase in the number of female ministers in the current Government can be viewed as a positive, yet still limited, step forward.

Data from a UNDP[20] study—showing that from 1946 to 2023, only 26 different women held positions in the executive branch in Montenegro—reveals much about the limited scope and continuity of women's participation in this segment of power over more than seven decades of political history.

An additional indicator of gender inequality in the executive branch is reflected in the structure of the highest functions within the Government. According to official data from the Government of Montenegro, all six Deputy Prime Minister positions in the current Government are held by men, while not a single woman occupies any of these roles. Such a distribution further confirms the pattern of political power concentration in the hands of men, particularly in positions that exert significant influence over departmental coordination and strategic decision-making.

The good news is that the Government of Montenegro has adopted the Draft Law on the Government,[21] marking the first time this key branch of power is being regulated by a unified legal text. This ensures greater predictability, transparency, and accountability of the executive branch.

This new law not only standardizes the Government's operations and strengthens institutional accountability but also introduces a **mandatory requirement that at least 40% of Government members belong to the less represented gender.** Furthermore, it stipulates that if the Government has more than one Deputy Prime Minister, at least one Deputy Prime Minister must be from the less represented gender, thereby explicitly promoting gender equality at the highest level of executive power. While the new legal framework alone cannot eliminate all structural and other barriers, its provisions represent a significant institutional shift and can serve as a foundation for the further democratization and more equitable inclusion of women in political processes in Montenegro.

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20 *UNDP, 80 Years of Women's Political History in Montenegro, 2023, 116 pp.*
21 Official profile of the Government of Montenegro, available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/DU8dj4PCO2T/?img_index=1

2.3 POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

The analysis of women's political representation at the local level is based on desk research of publicly available data from the official websites of municipalities, the State Election Commission, and the official acts of local assemblies. Due to the lack of a unified and centralized database, certain data were not available for all municipalities and all years, which represents one of the limitations of this analysis.

The period prior to 2018 was characterized by significantly fragmented local election cycles, which complicates a comparative analysis of women's political representation at the local level. Consequently, this analysis focuses on the period from 2018 to 2025, which allows for a more comparable insight into the trends and patterns of women's participation in local government bodies, while taking into account the availability and reliability of data.

In the 2025–2026 period, not a **single woman was recorded in the position of President of a Municipality** in Montenegro, indicating an almost total exclusion of women from executive power at the local level. This situation confirms the existence of strong structural and party-related barriers that hinder women's access to the most influential local functions.

Regarding Municipal Assemblies as representative bodies and decision-makers of general acts at the local level, four female Presidents of Municipal Assemblies were recorded during the same period: Jelena Borovinić Bojović in Podgorica; Milica Lalatović Žižić in Nikšić; Selma Omerović in Bijelo Polje; and Jovana Tošić in Pljevlja.

2.3.1. REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MUNICIPAL ASSEMBLIES

The analysis of the representation of women in municipal assemblies aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the current situation at the local level in Montenegro, while also examining differences among municipalities and changes over time. The presented data enable the identification of patterns regarding the percentage of women in local parliaments, rang-

ing from municipalities where visible progress has been achieved to those where women's representation remains markedly low.

The analysis also includes the existence of Women Councillors' Clubs. The inclusion of this element is intended to assess not only the numerical representation of women in municipal assemblies, but also the institutional conditions that may contribute to strengthening their political engagement.

Table 5: Representation of Women in Municipal Assemblies in Montenegro (2018–2025)

Municipality	Election year	Total municipal councilors (m/f)	Number of women	Percentage of women	Women's caucus
Andrijevica	2024	30	9	30%	YES
Andrijevica	2020	31	6	19,35%	NO
Bar	2022	37	15	**40,54%**	YES
Bar	2018	37	10	27%	NO
Berane	2024	34	12	35,29%	YES
Berane	2022	35	11	31,40%	YES
Berane	2018	35	8	22,80%	NO
Bijelo Polje	2022	36	13	**36,10%**	YES
Bijelo Polje	2018	38	10	31,60%	NO
Budva	2024 novembar	32	10	31,25%	YES
Budva	2024 maj	33	11	33,33%	YES
Budva	2022	33	11	33,33%	YES
Budva	2020	33	9	27,27%	NO
Cetinje	2021	23	8	34,78%	YES
Cetinje	2018	33	9	27,27%	NO
Danilovgrad	2022	33	10	30,30%	YES
Danilovgrad	2018	33	9	27,27%	NO
Gusinje	2024	30	9	30%	YES
Gusinje	2020	30	5	**16,67%**	YES
Herceg Novi	2025	35	13	37,14%	YES
Herceg Novi	2021	35	11	31,43%	NO
Kolašin	2022	31	9	29,03%	YES
Kolašin	2018	31	9	29,03%	NO
Kotor	2024	33	13	39,39%	YES

Kotor	2020	33	12	36,36%	NO
Mojkovac	2021	31	7	22,58%	YES
Nikšić	2025	41	14	34,15%	YES
Nikšić	2021	41	12	29,27%	YES
Petnjica	2021	31	8	25,81%	YES
Plav	2022	31	9	29,03%	YES
Plav	2018	31	8	25,81%	NO
Plužine	2022	29	11	37,93%	NO
Plužine	2018	30	7	23,33%	NO
Pljevlja	2023	34	12	35,29%	YES
Pljevlja	2018	35	10	28,57%	NO
Podgorica	2024	59	24	**40,68%**	YES
Podgorica	2022	58	21	36,21%	NO
Podgorica	2018	61	18	29,51%	NO
Rožaje	2022	34	10	29,41%	YES
Rožaje	2018	33	10	29,41%	NO
Šavnik	2018	30	9	30%	NO
Tivat	2022	32	14	**43,75%**	YES
Tivat	2020	32	8	25%	NO
Tuzi	2023	32	5	15,63%	YES
Tuzi	2019	32	4	**12,5%**	NO
Ulcinj	2022	33	12	36,36%	YES
Ulcinj	2018	33	7	21,21%	NO
Zeta	2022	32	9	28,13%	NO
Žabljak	2023	30	7	23,33%	NO
Žabljak	2017	31	6	19,35%	NO

Note: Municipal assemblies have different numbers of councillors, which means that the same change in the number of women councillors does not produce the same percentage effect in all municipalities. In smaller assemblies, even one additional or one fewer woman councillor can significantly alter the percentage of women's representation; therefore, the data should be interpreted taking into account the total number of councillors in each municipality.

The data show that in certain municipalities significant progress has been achieved, with women now accounting for more than 40% of councillors, while in a larger number of municipalities their share ranges between 30%

and 35%. Nevertheless, despite this progress, it is evident that local levels of government generally tend to "stall" at or only slightly above the legally prescribed minimum.

At the same time, the data indicate uneven trends. While some municipalities record continuous growth in the number of women councillors in each electoral cycle, in others progress occurs at a considerably slower pace or is almost imperceptible. In certain localities, the percentage of women in municipal assemblies remains below 25%, pointing to the strong influence of local political and social factors, including party structures, internal hierarchies, and dominant gender norms. These differences confirm that the increase in women's representation is not the result of a systemically uniform approach, but rather depends on local political will and the context in which elections take place.

Furthermore, municipalities with a higher number of women in local parliaments more frequently have established Women Councillors' Clubs, suggesting their potential as a space for the joint articulation of initiatives and positions. However, the mere existence of these clubs does not automatically translate into greater political influence for women, as their actual impact depends on a range of interconnected factors, including their level of activity, political support, available resources, and their ability to influence decision-making processes, particularly with regard to the executive branch at the local level.

2.4 POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN ON ELECTORAL LISTS / WITHIN POLITICAL PARTIES

This table provides an overview of the representation of women in positions of power within political parties in Montenegro during the period from 2012 to 2023. The presented data include the number of women who held the highest party offices, such as presidents, vice presidents, and members of party presidencies, as well as their specific positions within party structures. In this way, the table offers insight into changes and trends in women's participation in the leadership of political parties throughout the observed period.

Table 6: Political Representation of Women within Political Parties

Period / Elections	Political Party	Number and Positions of Women in Party Leadership	First and Last Name
2012.	Positive Montenegro	2 (Vice President + Presidency)	Azra Jasavić, Nataša Gojković
	Liberal Party	2 (Members of the Presidency)	Satka Hajdarpašić, Dubravka Vujačić
	Croatian Civic Initiative	1 (Vice President, later President)	Marija Vučinović
	Movement for Changes	1 (Member of the Presidency)	Branka Bošnjak
	Bosniak Party	0 (No Women in Positions of Power)	/
	Democratic Party of Socialists, Social Democratic Party, New Serb Democracy, Democratic People's Party, Socialist People's Party, Forca, Albanian List	0 (nema žena na pozicijama moći)	/
2016.	Social Democrats	2 (Vice President + Presidency)	Milanka Opačić, Biljana Borzan
	Croatian Civic Initiative	2 (President + Presidency)	Marija Vučinović, Ljerka Dragičević
	Democratic Party of Socialists	1 (Member of the Presidency)	Aleksandra Vuković-Kuč
	Albanian List, Social Democratic Party, Democratic Montenegro, Democratic Front, Coalition Key, Bosniak Party	0 (No Women in Positions of Power)	/
2020.	Social Democratic Party	1 (Party President)	Draginja Vuksanović-Stanković
	Democratic Alliance	1 (Vice President)	Ksenija Milović
	Social Democrats	3 (Vice President + Members of the Presidency)	Milica Lekić, Ivana Raščanin-Radičević, Irma Nišić
	United Reform Action	1 (Member of the Presidency)	Ana Novaković-Đurović

	Democratic Party of Socialists	1 (Vice President)	Sanja Damjanović
	Bosniak Party, Albanian List, For the Future of Montenegro, Democratic Montenegro	0 (No Women in Positions of Power)	/
2023.	Democratic Party of Socialists	8 (1 Vice President + 7 Members of the Presidency)	AleksandraVuković-Kuč (potpredsjednica), Suzana Pribilović, Drita Lolla, Lidija Kljajić, Zoja Lalović- Bojanić, Marija Markoč kao i Nemša Omerbegović.
	Democratic Montenegro	6 (1 Vice President + 5 Members of the Presidency)	Dragana Kaženegra-Stanišić, (potpredsjednica), Anđela Vojinović, Zdenka Popović,Tamara Vujović,Valentina Minić i Jovana Tošić.
	Europe Now Movement	2 (Vice President + Member of the Presidency)	Olivera Injac (potpredsjednica), Maida Gorčević
	Socialist People's Party	(President of the Parliament of Montenegro, 2023)	Danijela Đurović
	Croatian Civic Initiative	4 (Members of the Presidency)	Ljiljana Velić, Blanka Radošević-Marović, Tanja Grabić, Dijana Milošević
	Democratic Alliance	1 (President)	Ksenija Milović
	United Reform Action	3 (1 Vice President + 2 Members of the Presidency)	Ana Novaković Đurović (potpredsjednica), Ljiljana Jokić-Kapa, Ferida Peročević
	New Serb Democracy	1 (Vice President)	Jelena Božović
	Democratic People's Party	1 (Vice President)	Maja Vukićević
	Bosniak Party	1 (Member of the Presidency)	Sabina Muratović
	Social Democrats	2 (Members of the Presidency)	Marija Blagojević, Irma Nišić
	Liberal Party	1 (Member of the Presidency)	Jelena Marković
	Albanian Alliance, Albanian Forum, and Democratic Union of Albanians	0 (No Women in Positions of Power)	/

In 2012, out of the 12 political parties included in the analysis, only two had women in the position of Vice President, four had women as members of their presidencies, while no party had a woman at the head of the party.

In 2016, the situation remained largely unchanged. Women were present in party leadership positions in limited numbers, while most parliamentary parties continued to operate without a single woman in positions of power. Out of nine political parties, one had a female President, one had a female Vice President, and three had women as members of their presidencies.

In 2020, out of a total of 15 analyzed political parties, only one had a woman in the position of President, while three women served as Vice Presidents of political parties. Additionally, two parties recorded a total of three women in their presidencies, with one party having one member and the other having two members of the presidency.

In 2023, the most significant progress in the numerical representation of women in party leadership was observed. During this period, there was one female party President, one woman serving as President of the Parliament of Montenegro, six women serving as Vice Presidents of parties, and a total of 23 women as members of party presidencies.

The data clearly show that in most of the years analyzed, the number of women in positions of real party power was extremely limited or entirely absent, particularly in the largest and most influential political structures. In earlier electoral cycles (2012 and 2016), women's presence in party leadership was sporadic and mostly limited to smaller parties or isolated cases, while numerous parliamentary parties operated entirely without women in decision-making positions.

The 2020 and, especially, 2023 electoral cycles show some progress in the numerical representation of women within party leadership, particularly through the increased number of Vice Presidents and members of presidencies in certain parties. Nevertheless, despite this growth, women still rarely occupy the highest leadership positions, with the role of party President remaining an exception.

KEY OBSTACLES AND BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN MONTENEGRO

Possible reasons for the insufficient representation of women in political life are multiple. First and foremost, traditional patterns and conservative views regarding the role and status of women in Montenegrin society remain prevalent. In addition, women themselves often lack sufficient motivation, self-confidence, and readiness to engage more actively and exert greater influence in the public sphere. This situation is further compounded by both overt and subtle resistance from the male segment of the population toward women's participation in politics, which is often manifested in a lack of trust in their abilities to perform various political functions.

The price women pay for entering political life **often goes unrecognized by the public,** as politics is predominantly perceived as a space of personal interest, with the assumption that women have consciously accepted the existing patterns and challenges of such an environment. Due to unclear rules, internal party dynamics, and ongoing pressures, many female politicians give up on further advancement in their political careers. An additional barrier is the difficulty of reconciling private and public life. At the same time, it is evident that in areas where women's representation is significantly lower than men's–such as the military or industry–the cause is not a lack of interest or ability, but systemically imposed conditions that limit women's access to and retention in leadership positions.[22]

Isolating the individual forms of violence that women face in public and political life is not straightforward, as they often overlap and occur simultaneously. Different forms of pressure and violence frequently appear together. Nevertheless, we will attempt below to present the most common forms of obstacles and violence that women encounter in the political arena.

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22 CEDEM, *The Idea Whose Time Has Come – Women in Politics and Politics for Women*, p. 40, available at: IDEJA-CIJE-JE-VRIJEME-DOSLO-ZENE-U-POLITICI-I-POLITIKA-ZA-ZENE.pdf

The identified obstacles include:

- Women's personal perception of their own role and place in politics,
- Strong influence of tradition and family,
- High and often contradictory expectations from the public regarding women in politics,
- Gender-based violence, including digital abuse and hate speech,
- Financial and resource-related barriers,
- Structural obstacles within political parties and the electoral system.

Women's personal perception of their role and place in politics – one of the significant, yet often overlooked, obstacles to women's political participation relates to their own perception of their role, capacity, and position in public and political life.

According to a 2025 UNDP study,[23] women's personal perception of their place in public and political life represents a major barrier to their political participation. The findings indicate that respondents clearly recognize the privileged position of men in decision-making processes, as well as in social and political life more broadly, with women more frequently than men identifying the existence of gender inequalities. This perception of politics as an unequal space leads women to consciously assess political engagement as a field with higher risks and lower chances of success, contributing to their withdrawal from political involvement or candidacy.

Research also shows that women are exposed to indirect forms of discrimination related to age and family responsibilities–including the perception of motherhood as a "risk" and the view of women as less "available" and "reliable." These patterns further affect women's self-confidence and their assessment of their own legitimacy in political life.[24]

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23 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Gender Mainstreaming – *Attitudes and Perceptions of Citizens of Montenegro and Public Administration Employees on Gender Equality,* Podgorica, 2025, pp. 93–94
24 Ibid., pp. 9–12

Furthermore, a 2025 study[25] by the Civic Alliance indicates that the most frequently recognized barrier to women's political participation is identified as women's own lack of interest (32.8%). This finding points to a complex phenomenon in which women's limited political engagement is interpreted as an individual choice rather than as a consequence of structural and social constraints. Such a perception may reflect the internalization[26] of gender inequalities, whereby existing barriers are normalized and perceived as a "lack of interest" rather than as a result of unequal access to resources, power, and political opportunities.

According to the findings of UZOR's[27] focus group, politics is rarely perceived as a space for collectively addressing problems; rather, it is seen as a high-risk arena in which women must invest significantly more energy to be taken seriously. One focus group participant stated: *"I am interested in what is happening in society, but politics feels like a place where I don't have a real space to make an impact."*

In this context, women's personal perception of their own capacities cannot be separated from the broader social and institutional environment in which they operate. **Prolonged exposure to gender stereotypes, limited visibility of women in positions of power, and the way women in politics are portrayed in public and the media all contribute to women more frequently doubting their readiness and ability to perform high-level political functions.** These patterns often lead to low self-confidence, lack of motivation, and the feeling that politics "is not a space for them," affecting women's willingness to run for office, speak publicly, or remain politically active over the long term.

Supporting this, a 2024 study by DeFacto Consultancy[28] found that 48.2% of citizens in Montenegro believe that men make better political leaders than women.

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25 Civic Alliance, *Women's Participation in Local Politics in Montenegro – An Empirical Analysis of Councillors' Attitudes and Experiences,* Podgorica, November 2025, p. 21.
26 The term that refers to the transfer of certain external norms, standards, and relationships to the internal, mental plane, where they are experienced and perceived as one's own.
27 Association for Responsible and Sustainable Development (UZOR), *Focus Group Analysis – (Un)wanted in the Public Space: Voices That Rarely Get Heard,* 2026.
28 DeFacto Consultancy, *Violence against Women in Montenegrin Politics,* research conducted for the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), Podgorica, 2024.

Strong influence of tradition and family – traditional and patriarchal patterns are deeply rooted in the Montenegrin social context and have a long-lasting impact on perceptions of women's and men's social roles. Historically, women's roles were predominantly associated with the family and household care, while the public and political spheres were almost exclusively reserved for men. Women were expected to remain at home, raising children both as mothers and, in some sense, as fathers.[29]

Although the position of women has significantly evolved over time, certain elements of this traditional legacy continue to shape contemporary social attitudes and expectations, particularly regarding women's political engagement.

The way tradition and its legacies are transmitted and interpreted largely depends on individuals, often lacking a critical approach to traditional inheritance. Uncritical acceptance of certain patterns of Montenegrin tradition contributes to the maintenance and deepening of gender inequalities. A particularly strong perception persists that politics is a male domain, while women's roles are confined to the private sphere and family responsibilities. This understanding of tradition results in the continued belief that a woman's primary social role is motherhood and household management, while political participation is considered inappropriate for women.[30]

According to the findings of CeMI in its 2022 report, entering politics represents stepping out of the comfort zone for all actors, but this process is significantly more demanding for women than for men. This perception is linked to the existence of gender stereotypes, whereby women in politics are more frequently exposed to insults and negative reactions, which have a stronger and longer-lasting impact on them and their environment. Additionally, women's political engagement is often viewed through the lens of their family roles, particularly as mothers and wives, which influences their decision to participate in political life.

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29 Ivan Tepavčević, *A Perspective on the Position of Women in Montenegro in the 19th and Early 20th Century,* 245 pp., available at: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/ https://folia.ucg.ac.me/image/21/Tepavcevic.pdf

30 CeMI, Insecure in the Online Space – *Report on Gender-Based Disinformation and Online Violence Against Women in Politics in Montenegro,* 2022, p. 9.

The stereotyping of female roles still binds women to family care and the household, while political activity is perceived as a male domain. Women's involvement is directed more toward the private, rather than the public and/or political sphere of life.[31]

These patterns are not merely part of a narrative; they are clearly reflected in the attitudes of citizens. In this context, specific data shows that 66.4% of respondents cite family and household responsibilities as one of the key factors demotivating women from political participation, while 53.8% recognize the lack of family support as a significant barrier. Additionally, the fact that nearly a third of respondents (29.4%) answered "I don't know" or provided no answer when asked about potential solutions points to a deeply rooted normalization of these obstacles and a lack of social awareness regarding the need for systemic change.[32]

Women's achievements are often valued only within the context of motherhood, while situations in which they endure violence, renounce property, or face discrimination simply for being women remain frequent.[33]

Data from the 2023 Gender Equality Index[34] further confirms the depth of gender inequalities in the domain of time distribution. The gap in this domain stands at 58.9, while the sub-domain referring to care and unpaid domestic work–including childcare, care for elderly and infirm family members, as well as performing household chores–records even more pronounced inequality, with a value of 61.7.

This data clearly points to a significant disproportion in the performance of unpaid domestic work, which still predominantly falls on women. Consequently, women are left with less space and time for social engagement, professional development, and active participation in public and political life, further deepening the existing structural barriers to their political participation, while on the other hand, they are expected to achieve it all.

31 *CEDEM, Analysis of Gender Discrimination on the Political Scene of Montenegro, p. 7*
32 DeFacto Conslutancy, WFD, *Women's political activism in Montenegro – public opinion survey,* 2021
33 *Women's Rights Center, Association Spektra, Gender Perspective of the 2023 Parliamentary Elections, p. 14*
34 *MONSTAT, Gender Equality Index for 2023, p. 3*

High and often contradictory public expectations of women in politics – every second person in Montenegro believes that the issue of gender equality is "overemphasized," while more than half of the respondents say that men are better leaders, and four-fifths believe that motherhood is a woman's most important role.[35]

When choosing to enter the sphere of politics, for the majority of citizens, it means the following: women are expected to "look like women"–always well-groomed and poised–to behave in accordance with the social norms of the environment in which they live, and to simultaneously fulfill expectations related to the roles of mother and homemaker. Additionally, women are often expected to constantly prove themselves,[36] and to a much greater extent than is the case with men.

Even when women manage to fulfill these high and often mutually opposed expectations – to be professionally successful, competent, socially acceptable, and "balanced" between private and public life – their presence in politics is not necessarily perceived as a positive contribution. On the contrary, successful women in political life are often perceived as a threat to existing social and gender hierarchies, which makes them particularly exposed to criticism, belittlement, and gender-based attacks.

Instead of being valued according to their political results and public work, women often face insults, hate speech, and attempts at discredit that do not relate to their views or professional engagement, but rather to their appearance, private life, or the very fact that they occupy public space. This relationship further normalizes the narrative that a woman's political engagement is a "personal choice with predetermined consequences," which is often summarized in a message that is now ubiquitous on social networks and portals: "you got what you asked for."

The fact that such attitudes do not come exclusively from men, but often appear among women as well, is particularly concerning.

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35 UNDP, *Research on the Attitudes of Citizens and Public Administration Employees*, 2025.
36 *CEDEM, An Idea Whose Time Has Come – Women in Politics and Politics for Women, p. 39*

On the other hand, the media plays a crucial role in shaping public attitudes through the way they report on topics concerning women's participation and political representation, as well as the moves, decisions, and struggles women undertake and face. The media possesses the power, but they also carry the responsibility.

Media in Montenegro predominantly report on physical and sexual violence against women, while psychological and economic violence are almost entirely neglected.[37] This approach narrows the understanding of gender-based violence and leaves the impression that violence exists exclusively in its most extreme forms, while everyday, long-term, and systemic forms of violence are left out of the public focus.

Such a media framework can significantly impact public perception, creating a false narrative that women engaged in public or political action do not face violence, or that they have become "accustomed" to it due to the nature of their work. In reality, women in the public sphere largely endure psychological violence, harassment, threats, and other forms of gender-based violence, which remain insufficiently visible and are rarely recognized as a serious social problem.

Data from a CIN (Center for Investigative Journalism) study is concerning, showing that nine out of ten respondents on social media have encountered content attacking or belittling female ministers, MPs, journalists, and activists. On the other hand, a MASTER study showed that as many as 89.2% of respondents would elect a woman to the position of President of Montenegro.[38]

However, parallel to this data, one cannot ignore the fact that public space, especially social media and portals, is flooded with negative, sexist, and disparaging comments directed precisely at women in politics. This obvious discrepancy between declarative support and the actual treatment of politically active women raises a key question: **what is actually expected of women in politics, and how does society react when they meet those**

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37 *UNDP, Gender Mirror of the Media in Montenegro – Research and Content Analysis of Montenegrin Media from a Gender Perspective, Podgorica 2022.*
38 *MASTER, Analysis of the Existing State and Effectiveness of the Implementation of the Strategic Framework in the Field of Gender Equality, Podgorica 2022, p. 40*

expectations?

In practice, the success of women is rarely measured by their political results, public policies, or contributions to society; instead, it is most often evaluated through their appearance, behavior, tone of communication, and private life. Instead of recognition for their achievements, women face intensified scrutiny and criticism, confirming that a formal willingness to support a woman does not necessarily mean an essential acceptance of her political authority. This very contradiction represents one of the key obstacles women face in political action, which will be discussed further below.

Gender-based violence, including digital violence and hate speech – women entering the political scene often become targets of gender-based violence and aggressive online attacks. A large number of politically active women in Montenegro, and generally across the Western Balkans, experience various forms of violence – from verbal insults and threats to coordinated online attacks, which affects their willingness to act publicly and actively continue their political careers.

Some of the women from the political sphere in Montenegro who have been frequent and continuous targets of hate speech, intolerance, and online attacks include: *Draginja Vuksanović Stanković, Aleksandra Vuković Kuč, Jevrosima Pejović, Vesna Bratić, Božena Jelušić, Zdenka Popović, Sanja Damjanović, and many others.*

Hate speech is defined by the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination from 2014[39], following the recommendation of the Council of Europe. Article 9 of the Law states: hate speech is any form of expression of ideas, claims, information, and opinions that spreads, incites, encourages, or justifies discrimination, hatred, or violence against a person or group of persons because of their personal characteristics, xenophobia, racial hatred, antisemitism, or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including intolerance expressed in the form of nationalism, discrimination, and hostility against minorities.

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39 *Law on Prohibition of Discrimination (Official Gazette of Montenegro, No. 46/2010, 40/2011 - other Law, 18/2014 and 42/2017)*

POLITICAL (DIS)EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN BECOMES A TRADITION IN MONTENEGRO

Insight into comments and reactions in the public space indicates the prevalence of gender-based hate speech. Especially below portal articles related to gender equality, quotas, and women's political participation, offensive, sexist, and misogynistic content frequently appears, indicating an unfavorable social environment for women's public action. On the other hand, the absence of moderation of this type of content further contributes to its social acceptance by the public, reinforcing the perception that such forms of speech are acceptable and remain without adequate sanctions, thereby becoming further normalized and reproduced within public discourse.

Examples of gender-based hate speech in the digital space:
Gender-based violence against women includes violence directed against a woman because she is a woman, or violence that disproportionately affects women (Istanbul Convention, Article 3). There are various forms of online violence: *1) cyberstalking; 2) cyberbullying; 3) doxing; 4) non-consensual pornography (revenge porn); and 5) trolling.*[40]

Furthermore, there are different forms of gender-based violence: *1) physical violence; 2) emotional violence; 3) sexual violence; and 4) forced marriages.* GBV (Gender-Based Violence) can also take other forms, such as the denial of opportunities for education and access to the healthcare system and economic resources, or intimate partner violence if the violence occurs within the context of intimate relationships, etc.[41] It is important to keep in mind that most women face one or more forms of the gender-based violence listed here long before they even have the opportunity to decide to enter politics.

This is clearly evidenced by the stark data that 19 cases of femicide have been recorded in Montenegro over the last seven years, four of which were recorded in the first eight months of 2025. On average, one woman is killed every five months in the country, most often by a partner or former partner. [42]However, given the theme and focus of this report and the availability of publicly verifiable data, attention is focused on the prevalence of online violence and hate speech encountered by female politicians in Montenegro.

Additionally, all participants in the qualitative research conducted by the *Women's Safe House* approached the organization for help during the period they were exposed to online violence. Their experiences of digital violence predominantly produced feelings of distress, discomfort, anger, and shame. Particularly concerning is the data that two-thirds of the girls and women reported a loss of interest in activities they previously enjoyed,

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40 *CeMI, Report on Online Violence and Hate Speech Against Women in Politics in Montenegro, January 2024, p. 21*

41 *UNICEF, Improving the Health Status of Refugee and Migrant Children in Southern and South-Eastern Europe (Gender-Based Violence - Information)*

42 Avaliable at :https://www.cdm.me/hronika/za-osam-mjeseci-cetiri-zrtve-femicida-a-u-protek-lih-sedam-godina-19/

while all participants deleted their social media accounts. Most respondents also reported issues with depression, low self-esteem, and difficulties in establishing emotional relationships.[43]

Although the research in question did not specifically include women active in politics, its findings are relevant for understanding the broader consequences of digital violence against women in the public space. Despite the fact that women in politics are, by the nature of their engagement, under public and media scrutiny, this does not make them more resilient to the consequences of online violence. On the contrary, digital violence has an equally serious impact on their mental health, self-confidence, and sense of personal security as it does on women and girls who are only considering involvement in public or political life.

Findings from research by the *National Democratic Institute* (NDI) indicate that women holding government positions and other public offices in Montenegro are particularly exposed to gender-based harassment on social networks. These forms of violence include various practices of intimidation and discredit, including calls for violence, breaches of privacy, stalking, offensive and threatening content, as well as the misuse of private materials. Consequently, gender-based violence remains widespread, affecting every fourth woman in Montenegro.[44]

Therefore, gender-based violence remains widespread, affecting one in four women in Montenegro.[45]

In its first thematic report on Montenegro, published in November 2024, *GREVIO*[46]–the independent expert body of the Council of Europe responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Istanbul Convention–recognized certain progress in Montenegro in combating violence against women since 2018, but simultaneously pointed to a series of serious struc-

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43 *(Women's Safe House), Online Violence Against Girls and Women in Montenegro - Legal Framework and Qualitative Research, Podgorica, 2023*
44*CDT, Implications of Online Pressures: Online Silencing of Women in Montenegro, October 2023, p. 7*
45 UNDP, *Gender Equality profile of Montenegro,* Podgorica 2025.
46 *CEDEM, Monitoring Public Policies for Achieving Gender Equality according to CEDAW Recommendations, July 2025, p. 11*

tural barriers requiring urgent action. It specifically emphasized that gender stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes remain deeply rooted in Montenegrin society, including the media, political space, and institutions.

The European Commission's 2025 Report further confirms that gender-based violence remains a serious problem, with a low rate of prosecution for perpetrators and a lack of specialized support services for victims, which further discourages women from actively participating in public and political life.[47]

Financial and Resource Barriers – Financial and resource barriers represent one of the significant obstacles to women's political participation in Montenegro and, more generally, to women's participation in leadership or decision-making positions. According to the Gender Equality Index [48] the *"money"* domain, which measures gender inequalities in access to financial resources and the overall economic situation of women and men, stands at 61.9 in Montenegro, indicating a significant gap compared to the European average.

Particularly concerning is the *"financial resources"* sub-domain, which covers monthly earnings and total income of women and men, where the value is only 48.2. This result clearly indicates significant gender differences in income, which directly affect women's economic independence, their financial security, and their ability to invest in their own professional or political development.

Data from the *Gender Equality Profile of Montenegro,* prepared by *UNDP*,[49] indicates that the structural position of women in the economy represents a significant financial and resource barrier to their equal participation in public and political life. Although women make up 43% of the employed population, they are predominantly concentrated in lower-paid sectors such as education, healthcare, trade, and public administration, while being significantly underrepresented in sectors with higher earnings, such as ICT, construction, and finance. Additionally, women hold only 20% of

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47 *European Commission, 2025 Report, p. 48*
48 *MONSTAT, Gender Equality Index for 2023*
49 *National Strategy for Gender Equality 2025–2029, p. 32*

management positions. Women also more frequently work part-time or on temporary contracts, often due to unpaid family care responsibilities, which are still largely borne by women.

The legal framework in Montenegro provides for specific budgetary funds intended for the financing of political subjects, as well as the work of women's organizations within political parties. These funds are distributed according to predefined criteria, which include the number of mandates won and the representation of the underrepresented gender.

The *Law on Financing of Political* Entities and Election Campaigns[50] specifies that budgetary funds for the regular work of women's organizations in political entities in the Parliament amount to 0.05% of the planned total budgetary funds of the current budget, minus the funds of the capital budget and the budgets of state funds. These funds are distributed in equal amounts to political entities in the Parliament, or municipal assemblies, and are intended exclusively for financing the work of women's organizations within political entities, in accordance with their statutes.

However, in practice, these funds are very often not used in a way that contributes to the actual political empowerment of women. Research findings show that a large number of political entities do not fulfill their legal obligations regarding transparent reporting on the spending of funds intended for women's organizations, while in some cases, there are no adopted statutes for women's party organizations that would define the purpose and method of using these funds.[51]

In practice, financial barriers do not act merely as a technical issue of fund availability, but as a filter that decides who has the real possibility to enter the political space, to stay in it, and to progress. For women in Montenegro, who on average have fewer economic resources and weaker access to networks of political and financial power, this filter remains significantly narrower, thereby restricting political participation to a smaller number of women instead of reflecting the true diversity of society.

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50 *Law on Financing of Political Entities and Election Campaigns (Official Gazette of Montenegro, No. 3/2020 and 38/2020)*
51 *Women's Rights Center, Association Spektra, Gender Perspective of the 2023 Parliamentary Elections, p. 16*

Structural Barriers within Political Parties and the Electoral System – Research by the Inter-Parliamentary Union indicates that women's political activity is in most cases mediated by political parties, which represent the primary channel for their entry into politics. A smaller portion of women enter the political sphere thanks to the support of feminist NGOs and international actors. Nevertheless, one of the key forms of structural discrimination against women is present precisely within party structures, through the way they are organized and how power is distributed. Decision-making and candidacy processes are often closed, non-transparent, and concentrated within narrow circles of party elites. In Montenegro, an additional problem is the inadequate use of budgetary funds intended for the advancement of gender equality within political parties, which are often not spent in accordance with legal provisions and the intended purpose.[52]

According to research conducted by *DeFacto Consultancy for the WFD,* respondents identified the lack of support from political parties (51.4%), gender-based discrimination (44.8%), and cultural and social norms (41.2%) as the key obstacles women face in political activity.[53]

On the other hand, as many as 85.1% of female politicians believe that parties consciously ignore educated and capable women, giving preference to male colleagues when selecting for leadership positions. More than half of the respondents fully agree with the statement that competent women are systematically bypassed in the distribution of functions, confirming that women in politics do not face a lack of capacity, but rather a deeply rooted resistance to female leadership and closed networks of political power dominated by men.[54]

The practice of forming electoral lists further confirms that gender quotas in Montenegro are applied mostly formally. Data shows that most electoral lists for the 2023 parliamentary elections in Montenegro fulfilled only the

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52 *Women's Rights Center, Association Spektra, Gender Perspective of the 2023 Parliamentary Elections, p. 8*
53 *DeFacto Consultancy, Women's Political Activism in Montenegro, Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), 2021, p. 13*
54 Available at:https://en.vijesti.me/news-b/politika/787007/Women-in-local-politics-believe-they-are-discriminated-against%3B-all-key-positions-are-still-held-by-men

minimum legal requirements regarding quotas for the underrepresented gender, while only one list was headed by a woman. Additionally, the fact that the State Election Commission was forced to return three electoral lists for revision due to non-compliance with legal quotas indicates a low level of institutional and political responsibility in the nomination process.[55]

The electoral lists consisted of 1,113 candidates, of whom only 397 (35.67%) were women. Similarly, during the 2020 parliamentary elections, only one electoral list was led by a woman, confirming a continuous pattern in which gender quotas are applied primarily formally, without a real shift toward more equal political leadership. Therefore, increased participation of women in political life will more likely be achieved through legal changes and increased quotas than through expectations that parties will voluntarily contribute to the improvement of the position of women in politics.[56]

What also contributed to the declining number of women in the formed session of Parliament after the 2023 parliamentary elections was the ranking order of women in lower positions on the electoral lists. All of the above indicates that political parties in Montenegro formally respect legal obligations regarding gender quotas, but simultaneously maintain control over key positions of power through candidate ranking and internal decision-making mechanisms.

When women face such patterns of political activity, it is difficult to expect them to perceive politics as a space of equal opportunity and real influence. The decision of many women not to get involved or to withdraw from political life is conditioned by systemic barriers, the lack of support within their party structures, and the inability to advance further and make their voices heard.

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55 Available at:https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/658237/zena-na-celu-samo-jedne-od-15-izbornih-lista

56 CeMI, *Electoral Reform in Montenegro – Proposals for Improvement, 2024, p. 36*

IV

FROM QUOTAS TO GENUINE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN: WHERE DOES MONTENEGRO STAND TODAY?

Montenegro was among the last countries in the Western Balkans to introduce gender quotas. A lower level of prioritization of gender issues by organizations and political parties, as well as a more pronounced resistance of political elites to the introduction of gender quotas, contributed to delays in improving the legislative framework in this area.[57]

The struggle for women's political participation in Montenegro began long before the formal introduction of gender quotas and unfolded within the context of a deeply rooted patriarchal political culture, in which the very idea of women as relevant political actors was long considered unattainable. Prior to 2011, when mandatory gender quotas were introduced for the first time, women's presence in political life depended almost exclusively on the will of political parties, resulting in their extremely low and unstable representation.

Amendments to the *Law on the Election of Councillors and Members of Parliament* adopted in 2014 introduced the obligation that the less represented gender must constitute at least 30% of candidates on electoral lists, along with the rule that among every four consecutive candidates, at least one must belong to that gender (Article 39a). Additionally, the law предусмотред a mandate protection mechanism, whereby in the event of the termination of the mandate of a Member of Parliament or councillor from the less represented gender, the vacant seat would be filled by the next candidate of the same gender from the electoral list (Article 104, paragraph 3).

It is important to emphasize that merely increasing the percentage of women on electoral lists does not necessarily result in a higher percentage of women in parliamentary seats or in decision-making positions. This lesson stems

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57 Merita Limani, *"Women's Political Participation: A Comparative Study of Gender Quota Implementation in Six Western Balkan Countries," Journal of Social and Educational Research,* 2023, p. 27.

precisely from the first attempt to introduce gender electoral quotas in Montenegro in 2011, when the newly introduced legal requirement of a minimum of 30% women on electoral lists resulted in only a very slight increase in the percentage of female Members of Parliament. The reason was that women were mostly ranked at the very bottom of party lists, without real chances of being elected.[58]

An additional problem was the absence of a legal provision ensuring that, in the event of the termination of a female MP's mandate, her seat would be taken by another woman rather than a man. For this reason, amendments to the Law on the Election of Councillors and Members of Parliament were adopted in 2014. As previously noted, Article 104 of this law guarantees that if the mandate of a councillor or MP from the less represented gender is terminated, the seat will be filled by the next candidate from the electoral list who also belongs to the less represented gender.

The way political parties position women on electoral lists affects their motivation and willingness to run in the future, potentially creating a vicious cycle of reduced visibility and interest. In this context, the narrative of women's "lack of interest" is often used to justify their underrepresentation, even though it largely results from party practices and structural constraints. For this reason, gender quotas represent one of the key mechanisms for increasing the number of women in political life, as they ensure a minimum level of representation on electoral lists and secure their placement in positions that provide a realistic chance of election.[59]

The introduction of a quota requiring at least 30% representation of the less represented gender on electoral lists marked an important step forward, but not the end of the struggle. On the contrary, each subsequent phase of quota implementation proved to be a new arena of political and social negotiation–from efforts to ensure the consistent application of candidate placement rules on electoral lists, to resistance against every attempt to increase the percentage of women's representation. The increase of the statutory quota to 40% in 2025 therefore does not represent a sudden shift, but rather the result of

58 Women's Rights Center, *Parliamentary Elections 2020 from a Gender Perspective,* February 2021, p. 3.
59 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *80 Years of the Political History of Women in Montenegro,* 2023, p. 118.

long-term and continuous advocacy, reflecting the slow and often conflictual process of institutional recognition of women's right to equal participation in political decision-making.

However, the initiative to raise the existing quota from 30% to 40% for the less represented gender, along with the additional rule that *at least one out of every three candidates on an electoral list must belong to that gender,* received support in the Parliament and across the political spectrum in Montenegro. The proposal was initiated through the Parliamentary Committee on Gender Equality in 2025 and was supported by key institutions, including the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and the Government. This form of political compromise and agreement indicates the existence of a broader political consensus on the need to strengthen the normative framework for greater representation of women in political office.

It is important to emphasize that, at present, gender quotas do not guarantee full equality or equal inclusion of women in politics; rather, they prevent their complete exclusion from the political sphere. Although in certain contexts they may appear symbolic or be perceived as merely a formal requirement, quotas nevertheless represent a crucial corrective mechanism that limits the reproduction of deeply rooted gender inequalities within political structures and ensures a minimum institutional space for women's presence in politics.

If a model of 50% parity representation were to be considered in the future, it could open space for qualitative changes in women's political representation, provided that such a solution is accompanied by clear rules on candidate placement on electoral lists and mechanisms that prevent its purely formal, rather than substantive, implementation.

Therefore, legally prescribed quotas have the most significant impact on the election of women, as they apply to all political parties and the law itself provides a mechanism for their enforcement. However, if female candidates are positioned too low on electoral lists, even high quota percentages will not lead to their actual election. The most favorable model in this regard is the so-called "zipped" list, in which men and women are placed alternately, thereby providing women with more realistic chances of being elected.[60]

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60   OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Handbook for Monitoring*

PODCAST SERIES V

For the first time, CeMI launched and distributed a podcast format titled *"Without a Filter"* as a platform for open discussions on various topics of social importance and as a space for public information and advocacy. This podcast series, consisting of three episodes, addressed the position of women and their participation in the political scene of Montenegro, with a particular focus on the distinction between formal representation and actual political power. The decision to distribute this type of platform represented a deliberate step toward bringing complex topics such as political participation, gender policies, and social barriers closer to the broader public through an accessible and contemporary media format.

5.1 EPISODE I: "A STEP, NOT THE GOAL: 40% IS STILL NOT EQUALITY"

The first episode of the podcast "Without a Filter," titled "A Step, Not the Goal: 40% Is Still Not Equality," was dedicated to the topic of gender quotas on electoral lists. We chose to open the series with this issue given that, at the end of July 2025, Montenegro adopted amendments to the Law on the Election of Councillors and Members of Parliament, increasing the statutory quota for the representation of women, or the less represented gender, on electoral lists from 30% to 40%. This legislative change represents an important institutional step toward advancing formal gender equality, while at the same time raising questions about its actual scope and practical effects.

In order to support this initiative, but also to send a clear message that increasing quotas must not be viewed as the ultimate goal, but rather as a starting point for deeper change, the first episode focused on a critical examination of the relationship between formal representation and women's actual political power. In this context, the first guest of the podcast was *Jelenka Andrić,* who initiated the proposal to increase the statutory quota from 30% to 40%, thereby making a significant contribution to strengthen-

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Women's Participation in Elections, 2005, p. 24.

ing the normative framework of gender equality in Montenegro.

The discussion emphasized that the increase in the statutory quota does not represent a final objective, but rather a transitional phase and a tool toward achieving full gender equality in political life. Quotas were introduced as a response to the urgent need for institutional action, and without them, the current level of women's representation in the Parliament of Montenegro would not have been achieved. Although such legislative changes may appear limited in the short term, they have measurable effects when observed over a longer period of time.

In addition to her, the discussion featured Professor *Olivera Komar* from the Faculty of Political Science, as well as the President of the Governing Board of CeMI and electoral reform expert, *Zlatko Vujović,* who contributed to a deeper analysis of the topic from academic and institutional perspectives. Professor Komar particularly emphasized that quotas should be understood as a temporary corrective to structural inequality, not as a substitute for genuine transformation of the political system, highlighting the importance of political culture, education, and long-term societal change. Mr. Vujović shared this view, stressing that the purpose of quotas is to open the door to the political arena, while it remains the responsibility of political parties and institutions to ensure conditions in which women can genuinely build authority, influence political processes, and contribute to societal development.

On the other hand, what is particularly significant is the proper positioning of women on electoral lists, mechanisms for protecting women's mandates, and the need to strengthen internal democracy within political parties. In other words, the formal fulfillment of statutory quotas must not become a substitute for the genuine inclusion of women in decision-making processes; otherwise, there is a risk that quotas will remain a mere administrative obligation without substantive political impact.

The conclusions of this episode clearly indicated that increasing the quota to 40% represents an important, yet insufficient, step toward gender equality, and that achieving genuine political participation of women requires parallel reforms within political parties, changes in social norms, and the consistent implementation of the existing legislative framework.

"From a legislature that had only a few female MPs, we have reached 23 women in parliament, precisely thanks to the introduction of quotas." – Jelenka Andrić, Chairwoman of the Gender Equality Committee in the Parliament of Montenegro

"My motivation is not to achieve a higher number of women in politics, but a higher number of women leaders." – Zlatko Vujović,President of the Governing Board of CeMI

"Political parties are now required to have 40%, but in reality they do not have 40% of women who are active within their membership. So we will see yet another double effort by the parties to somehow fill that quota, which often means appointing women who 'don't rock the boat,' don't cause trouble, and so on."- Olivera Komar, professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences

5.2 EPISODE II: "ARGUMENTS INSTEAD OF LYNCHING AND MISOGYNY"

In the second episode of the podcast titled *"Arguments Instead of Lynching and Misogyny,"* the discussion focused on the presence and forms of gender-based attacks, insults, and misogyny in both public and online spaces, as well as their impact on women's political and social participation. The conversation raised the issue of how negative and often aggressive comments–especially on social media and in digital communication–become normalized and form one of the most common barriers to women's engagement in public life. These attacks also affect women's sense of safety, visibility, and motivation to remain active in the political sphere.

We hosted **Jevrosima Pejović,** an independent Member of Parliament in Montenegro, who has frequently been a target of attacks and misogynistic comments herself. Through her personal experiences, the episode offered a concrete insight into how gender-based attacks operate in practice and the consequences they have on political activity, mental health, and women's willingness to remain active in public life. Criticism of women in politics often does not concern their views or work but instead focuses on personal disqualification, belittlement, and gender stereotypes, systematically shifting public dialogue away from arguments and the substance of political issues.

Thus, the normalization of misogyny in public spaces is one of the key factors preventing women from political engagement. It also shapes the perception that politics is often a "hostile environment" for women, representing some of the main barriers we discussed earlier.

"Undermining women's rights and struggles is perhaps the most dangerous thing happening these days on the political scene." – Jevrosima Pejović, independent Member of Parliament

5.3 EPISODE III: "WHY DOES POWER IN MONTENEGRO HAVE NO FEMALE FACE?"

In the third episode of the podcast titled *"Why Does Power in Montenegro Have No Female Face?"*, the discussion focused on the structural and institutional barriers that continue to prevent women from being equally represented in centers of political power, despite formal gender policies. The episode highlighted that without clear political will, systemic change, and strong female solidarity, gender equality remains a declarative value rather than a substantive reality in practice.

In this context, Member of Parliament of Montenegro *Aleksandra Vuković Kuč* pointed out that Montenegro today does not function as a meritocracy but as a "kakistocracy," where knowledge, education, and competence are not the key criteria for political advancement. According to her, the tolerance of dubious and purchased diplomas, combined with the strong influence of patriarchal patterns and resistance to gender-sensitive language, directly prevents educated and competent women from breaking into centers of political power. She therefore considers binding quotas of 50% to be the only fair solution.

On the other hand, psychologist and gender studies scholar *Ervina Dabidžinović* viewed the problem of women's political invisibility as a consequence of prolonged structural and institutional patriarchal violence, which produces a system where women are formally present but substantively excluded from power. She argues that political parties function as centers of the most rigid patriarchal control, where women's attempts to take a real share of power are often met with exclusion, attacks, and delegitimization.

"At first, I was against quotas–in the sense that you have to be in a party just because you are a woman–but now I'm 300% in favor. Because I realized that, essentially, without their binding effect, women will remain at 5% representation, both within parties and in Parliament."
– Aleksandra Vuković Kuč , Member of Parliament in Montenegro

"The way we perceive political parties in Montenegro is such that there must always be a leader, and that leader must be an authority greater than the father they have at home. Since the advent of parliamentary democracy, political parties have been the ones shaping public space. So, do women even have equal access to politics?" – Ervina Dabižinović, psychologist and gender studies scholar

By integrating the key findings and messages from this podcast series into the report, we aimed to ensure that public dialogue is translated into concrete analytical insights and recommendations. This gives the podcast added, long-term value as a tool for informing decision-makers, as well as all other stakeholders interested in advancing gender equality and women's political participation in Montenegro.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although Montenegro possesses a relatively developed normative and strategic framework in the area of gender equality, the analysis shows a significant gap between the prescribed standards and their implementation in practice. Gender equality is recognized in the Constitution, laws, and strategic documents as both a democratic and developmental value, yet its effects in practice are limited and uneven. It is particularly evident that gender inequalities are most pronounced in the domain of political and social power, where women, despite constituting the majority of the population, continue to have limited influence in decision-making processes.

The lack of sanctions for non-compliance with laws, weak institutional and financial capacities, and the absence of gender-sensitive planning and budgeting demonstrate that gender equality has still not been fully integrated into all stages of public policy design and implementation. This confirms that the mere existence of laws and strategies is not sufficient; without genuine political will, institutional accountability, and changes in social patterns, gender equality in Montenegro often remains a normative obligation rather than a lived reality.

The report indicates that the position of women in Montenegro's political life can be described as formally included but substantively limited. Women are present within institutions, but rarely in positions where key decisions are made. Their political power continues to depend more on individual exceptions than on systematically ensured conditions.

Although legal quotas have contributed to an increase in the number of women in parliaments and local assemblies, they have not changed the way power is distributed within political structures. Women most often enter through replacements during mandates, are less frequently found in leadership positions, and remain almost invisible at the decision-making tops of political parties. Nevertheless, quotas remain a necessary instrument for ensuring a minimal presence of women in political institutions

and an important link in breaking the long-standing exclusion of women from the political arena. Their impact, however, remains limited if not accompanied by concrete measures and mechanisms that guarantee an equal distribution of political power and real opportunities for advancement.

On the other hand, the obstacles women face are not individual but systemic. Traditional patterns, distrust in women's leadership and abilities, lack of support within parties, limited access to financial resources, and the frequent presence of gender-based and digital violence create an environment where it is more difficult for women to enter politics, advance within it, and remain politically active. For this reason, the responsibility for low female representation is often wrongly shifted onto the women themselves and linked to their perceived lack of interest, rather than recognizing the broader social and institutional context.

Ultimately, it is clear that political equality for women in Montenegro cannot be achieved solely through laws and quotas. Without changes in political practices, strengthening institutional accountability, and creating a safe and supportive environment for women's political engagement, the existing normative framework will remain of limited scope. For this reason, it is crucial that everyone collectively works to improve political culture and raise awareness about the importance of gender equality, as this creates a space that will not only benefit today's women actors but also future generations of women who wish or plan to engage in political life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Enhance institutional and financial support for women's parliamentary networks and forums,* enabling them to systematically develop and implement advocacy programs in the areas of gender equality, women's rights, and gender-sensitive public policies.

2. *Invest additional efforts in strengthening the capacities of media professionals for gender-sensitive reporting,* especially during election campaigns, through specialized training, guidelines, and codes of professional conduct. This would contribute to reducing stereotypes and discriminatory content in the media space.

3. *Increase the visibility of expert and politically active women* by ensuring their more balanced inclusion as interviewees, analysts, and commentators in news and debate formats.

4. Encourage and formalize collaboration between women's civil society organizations and the relevant media regulatory bodies, particularly the Agency for Audiovisual and Media Services and its Council, through *cooperation agreements, advisory mechanisms, or working groups.* The goal of this collaboration is the systematic monitoring of media reporting from a gender perspective, the improvement of existing guidelines and codes, and the more consistent application of gender equality standards in the media space.

5. In order to ensure genuine gender equality in the electoral process, it is recommended *to introduce a parity system that guarantees an equal number of women and men (50%)* on electoral lists, with the mandatory application of the so-called "zip" system, which ensures alternating placement of candidates by gender on the lists.

6. Ministry of Internal Affairs and judicial authorities should further improve the organization, coordination, and functioning of existing specialized teams and procedures for handling cases of gender-based violence. *This includes regular and mandatory training for staff, evaluation of the application of existing protocols in practice, strengthening inter-institutional cooperation, and considering the establishment of additional specialized teams* where needed, following good European practices.

7. It is essential to ensure *the consistent application of legal provisions on gender representation in electoral lists,* through a clearly defined obligation for the State Election Commission to reject the approval of electoral lists that do not meet the legally prescribed number and placement of female candidates.

8. *Work on changing social narratives* through targeted campaigns, research, and educational programs that challenge gender stereotypes and the normalization of violence against women in politics.

9. It is necessary to further *review and align the Law on Gender Equality* with Montenegro's international obligations and relevant EU directives, while simultaneously strengthening institutional capacities for its implementation. This includes systematic and mandatory training for staff in competent institutions, a clear division of responsibilities, and the establishment of clear and measurable accountability mechanisms for the enforcement of gender policies.

10. In Montenegro, it is essential to *systematically strengthen the visibility of women's voices in public and political spaces by promoting positive and inspiring examples of women* who are successful in various areas of society, as well as those who actively contribute to building a fairer and more progressive society. Through targeted media content, public campaigns, and educational programs, such examples can motivate and encourage other women to engage more actively in political processes, public life, and decision-making, contributing in the long term to the strengthening of gender equality and democratic culture.