

Women in the Mirror 2025



ENABLING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP: A DEMOCRATIC IMPERATIVE



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INICIATIVA KOSOVARË PËR STABILITET
KOSOVAR STABILITY INITIATIVE



Forumi Ekonomik i Grave
Ekonomski Forum Žena
Women's Economic Forum



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Swiss Agency for Development
and Cooperation SDC



As we close the first quarter of the 21st century, many economies are experiencing stagnant growth and widening inequalities, political polarization has deepened in numerous democracies, and young people are increasingly alienated from core democratic principles. While the causes of these trends are often blamed on COVID-19, rising income inequality and failed governance, there is a key systematic challenge that is far too often overlooked: the marginalization of women across myriad sectors of society. Global progress depends on addressing this intersectional imperative and placing fair representation for women at the center of economic and democratic renewal.

Women hold only 27% of seats in national parliaments globally — progress has stalled despite decades of effort.

It is time to recognize the vital link between the marginalization of women in both politics and economics. Despite often surpassing men in education, their accomplishments rarely translate into leadership roles in societal power structures. While women's representation in national parliaments has more than doubled since 2000, today it is still stagnant at just 27 percent. Women heads of state remain rare, with only one third of nations ever having one and only a few dozen states having had one in 2025, half of whom are in Europe. In business, the situation also remains challenging, with women only leading roughly ten percent of Fortune 500 companies. While women increasingly reach the top echelons of business, they face significant barriers at the C-Suite levels. Even worse, recent studies show that some women do not even try for promotions due to systemic obstacles.

Women lead roughly 10% of Fortune 500 companies, showing persistent barriers at the highest leadership levels.

Studies have long shown that economically independent women are better positioned to overcome institutional barriers to political engagement. [Naila Kabeer](#) argued back in 1999 how the acquisition of economic resources enhances women's ability to exercise agency in the political sphere. And we know that when women are at the table, policy outcomes are stronger and more inclusive. Yet, a generation later, we have not matched these insights with action. Economic empowerment alone, however, is not sufficient. Without reform in political institutions and party practices, women's economic gains do not automatically translate into political power.

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Kosovo undertook groundbreaking research – including nationwide surveys, focus groups and in-depth interviews – to identify root causes and propose solutions to this challenge. Kosovo offers an excellent test case: a small, highly educated population in

a vibrant yet imperfect democracy, where women's formal labor force participation hovers at just 20 percent. The country has elected two women presidents and appointed numerous women deputy prime ministers and ministers. Despite these gains, women remain sidelined in power structures across political parties, the economy, and academia. Women have exceeded the quota in their election to parliament, yet still remain far from 50 percent parity, and they lag especially in leadership at the local level.

The persistent inequalities for women in Kosovo's labor market and political representation – despite progressive legislation and women outperforming men in education – reveal critical correlations between economic participation and political power. NDI's research highlights systemic barriers, such as discrimination related to pregnancy, unpaid care work burdens, limited childcare infrastructure, and patriarchal norms. These structural and economic challenges directly impede political empowerment. Women's low formal employment reduces the pool of economically independent women able to run for office and shapes voters' and political parties' perceptions of women's "suitability" for leadership. Moreover, women's political participation is hindered by informal nomination processes, high social and economic costs to run for office, and media biases that reinforce stereotypes. The point argued by thought leader Laura Bates in her book "We Need to Fix the System, Not the Women" echoes the experience of NDI in facing systematic barriers to furthering women's political and economic participation. Our efforts to equip women with skills and training are necessary, but not sufficient without systemic reforms that remove structural barriers.

Women's formal employment expands political influence only when political institutions and party systems are open to women.

Research shows that boosting women's formal employment and economic independence expands their influence and power in the political sphere, but only when paired with reforms that open up political institutions and party systems to women. Governance reforms that integrate labor and social policies with equality goals, backed by strong implementation and accountability mechanisms, can transform politics to be more inclusive. The strategic linkages position women, not just as participants, but also as agents of change shaping democratic governance and policy.

NDI's research and analysis reveal three broad themes that are crucial for progress in women's empowerment at the intersection of economy and governance: accountability, investment, and positive disruption of patriarchal norms. Societies must hold governments, political parties and institutions accountable for implementing existing laws and regulations aimed at ensuring fair representation,

including labor protections. Governments must commit long-term resources and policies to address women's barriers in employment, care work and political participation, including sustained public investment in childcare systems and targeted active labor market programs for women. Societies must also be courageous in challenging patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes and unconscious bias through multifaceted campaigns and engagement of diverse influential stakeholders, such as campaigns that normalize shared caregiving roles for men and women or which fast-track women into visible leadership positions. Such positive disruption is critical to changing the underlying system, which inhibits the empowerment of women and thus societal advancement.

Integrating labor and social policies with equality goals can transform politics to become more inclusive.

Success requires a multisectoral collaboration, including political entities, civil society, business, and the media to shift norms and create enabling environments for women's empowerment and societal advancement. This will require political parties to adopt innovative recruitment and support mechanisms for women candidates, especially between election cycles. Journalists and editors in the media must be trained to be aware of and counter biases and enhance women's visibility, especially in prime time shows and in editorial leadership. The private sector must also play a central role by promoting equal pay, fair hiring and promotion practices, flexible work arrangements, and leadership pipelines for women. It is also critical to advance women as equal participants in the marketplace by removing economic and social barriers through comprehensive childcare systems, adequate maternity and paternity leave, access to healthcare, and strong anti-discrimination enforcement in employment.

Such transformation demands an urgent, all-of-society call to action. Nations must embrace women as pivotal leaders in their economies and governance, not only for better outcomes benefiting all but also as a cornerstone of democratic fairness and fundamental human rights. It is well past time to make this shift an imperative.