

DR Congo's 2023 elections: the European Union and its Member States should actively support women's political participation



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This policy brief outlines recommendations for a more coherent, continued, and strategic Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) engagement by the European Union (EU) and its Member States focusing on pre-election, elections and post-election times in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

The full participation of women in political structures and in public decision-making processes is an important indicator of the level of gender equality and the cornerstone of democracy in a country. In the DRC, women represent 51% of the population.¹ However, women's political participation through running for office, voting or actively participating in democratic oversight by citizens has remained low across the board.

¹ [République démocratique du Congo](#), UN WOMEN, consulted on 10 November 2021.

The EU's latest Gender Action Plan (GAP III) outlines a forward-looking vision to make support to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) an integral part of EU external action and development policy. **By 2025, 85% of all new actions throughout external relations should contribute to GEWE.** To meet its own high ambitions, the EU should scale up leadership, expertise, and collaboration among its Member States.²

The reality of women's political participation in the DRC

General political underrepresentation of women

The Congolese government is bound by a series of international agreements and national legislation to ensure the equal rights of men and women to enjoy all civil and political rights,³ to achieve gender parity at all levels of state institutions⁴ and to take all appropriate measures to ensure the full development and advancement of women.⁵ Moreover, the Congolese National Action Plan on United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSC1325) includes the objective of an increase of 20% in decision-making of women and young women, particularly through elections at all levels.

Parity in the DRC is a constitutional principle, which in theory constitutes a unique opportunity for equal representation of men and women in decision-making bodies in the country.⁶ However, women in the DRC remain severely underrepresented at the political level.

Not enough women political candidates

In the DR Congo, the election of women in legislative and political positions lacks behind:

- During the 2018 elections, women represented only 11% of the legislative candidacies as well as provincial candidates.⁷ This low representation is especially seen in rural areas.
- According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), only 12.8% of the MPs of the two chambers are women.⁸

The electoral law of 2017 even caused a further set-back regarding women's participation:

- It no longer requires parity but only requires consideration to be given to women's representation in the lists of the political party.⁹

² [Matching ambition with reality: how the EU's gender action plan fits into the programming of its external action](#), ECDPM, October 2021.

³ Article 3 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

⁴ Article 14 of the Congolese Constitution.

⁵ Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.

⁶ [Promoting gender equality. European rhetoric in view of the facts. Challenges and lessons learned for transformative European support for women's political and civic participation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda](#), EurAc, December 2019.

⁷ [Democratic Republic of the Congo 2018; Harmonized Presidential, Parliamentary and Provincial Elections; Expert Mission Report](#), The Carter Center, December 2019. According to data provided by CAFCO (Cadre Permanent de Concertation de la Femme Congolaise), women represented 1,794 of 15,355 registered legislative candidacies, or 11.68 percent, and 2,313 of 19,640 provincial applicants, or 11.77 percent.

⁸ [Inter-Parliamentary Union](#), consulted on 10 November 2021.

⁹ [Democratic Republic of the Congo 2018; Harmonized Presidential, Parliamentary and Provincial Elections; Expert Mission Report](#), The Carter Center, December 2019.

- It imposes many constraints of which especially women candidates bear the brunt, as their average financial and social conditions are not considered. It concerns for example the fact that candidates must make a financial deposit¹⁰ and an increase of non-reimbursable registration fees.¹¹

Furthermore, a weaker educational progression by women, which in many cases is a result of gender-based discriminatory norms, contributes to lower representation of women in legislative and political roles.

In the DRC, as in many other countries, the behaviour of women and girls is subject to certain expectations on the part of the family, the community and society at large who are strongly against their involvement in the public domain, whether it be in politics or in civil society. The political domain in particular is mainly perceived as a men's affair, associated with negative values and behaviour that would not be natural for women and more the attribute of men. Politics is traditionally described as a "dirty" and hard universe where corruption and lies reign. The morality of women involved in politics is therefore often questioned and their social image is often tarnished. Moreover, the perception that the prevalence of sexual harassment is particularly important in political parties only accentuates this negative image of those engaged in politics, which greatly limits women's participation.¹²

Barriers to enabling women as voters

At least as important for women's direct political participation through standing as candidate, is the question to what extent they are allowed to vote and are enabled to vote in an informed way.

While in 2018, 50.6% out of the 40 million registered voters were women (and this number was even higher in North Kivu),¹³ this percentage does not necessarily indicate that women can effectively fulfil their electoral rights.

Women still face barriers to vote, especially in the more isolated rural areas. As voters women face traditional gender roles, gender-based stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes and norms but also practical barriers such as lack of ID and documentation required for voter registration and lack of information and awareness about voter registration procedures. The lack of research on the matter makes it difficult to give a comprehensive view on their level of participation.

In July 2021, the central government announced its intention to hold a general census of the population before the 2023 elections that should support the process of voters' registration.¹⁴

¹⁰ [Peace & Equal Political Participation of Women in the DRC](#), Relief Web, consulted on 10 November 2021.

¹¹ [Democratic Republic of the Congo 2018; Harmonized Presidential, Parliamentary and Provincial Elections; Expert Mission Report](#), The Carter Center, December 2019.

¹² [Promoting gender equality. European rhetoric in view of the facts. Challenges and lessons learned for transformative European support for women's political and civic participation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda](#), EurAc, December 2019.

¹³ [Promoting gender equality. European rhetoric in view of the facts. Challenges and lessons learned for transformative European support for women's political and civic participation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda](#), EurAc, December 2019.

¹⁴ [RDC: le recensement de la population, enjeu du respect du calendrier électoral](#), RFI, July 2021.

The critics argue that this costly operation was just proposed to justify a delay of the elections and insist on the direct registration of voters. Whatever the outcome of this debate will be, the proper registration of women voters in all areas of the country remains crucial for them to exercise their full democratic rights.

GAP III: matching ambitions with reality in the DRC

In this context, **achieving the 85% target in DR Congo will require a systematic change for the EU to meet its own high ambitions and position itself as a significant actor for gender equality in the multilateral fora.**¹⁵

Strong political will is needed from the Congolese legislature and the diplomatic influence of the European actors at the highest level is indispensable. The implementation of GAP III in the areas of promotion of equal participation and leadership points to the same direction. It indicates that political dialogues with national authorities should integrate a gender perspective and it goes further by including dialogues on GEWE with national gender equality mechanisms, parliaments and other key institutional actors and local authorities.¹⁶

Beyond political pressure, the advocacy done by local women CSOs and networks for changing the legal frameworks is crucial in the pre-electoral context. European actors could play a key role in supporting these by strengthening their organisational and institutional capacity. Furthermore, according to the research that EurAc conducted in 2019, there is a need to promote synergistic work through the support not only of formalised consortia, but also informal coalitions of Congolese CSOs. The establishment of broad coalitions and networking is a key factor for the success of advocacy activities.¹⁷

As the implementation of GAP III runs parallel to the programming of the EU external action under the new Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI-Global Europe) for the period 2021-2027, this offers an opportunity for the EU and its Member States to better integrate GEWE in its interventions in the coming years.¹⁸

In light of this, EurAc and its member organisations outline a series of recommendations to help achieve the 85% target, with an emphasis on the upcoming elections scheduled for December 2023.

¹⁵ [Matching ambition with reality: how the EU's gender action plan fits into the programming of its external action](#), ECDPM, October 2021.

¹⁶ [Joint Staff Working Document : objectives and indicators to frame the implementation of the Gender Action Plan III](#), European Commission, November 2020.

¹⁷ [Promoting gender equality. European rhetoric in view of the facts. Challenges and lessons learned for transformative European support for women's political and civic participation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda](#), EurAc, December 2019.

¹⁸ [Matching ambition with reality: how the EU's gender action plan fits into the programming of its external action](#), ECDPM, October 2021.

Recommendations to the European Union and its Member States

General recommendations

- Urge the Congolese government to provide support to the National Action Plan 1325 (**NAP1325**) to improve women's political participation and enable them to fully exercise their right to vote. Use NAP1325 as a vehicle to support women candidates and voters in the forthcoming electoral processes.
- Further promote **political dialogue** as an integral tool for promoting GEWE. Ensure that heads of delegation and political section leaders are aware of their responsibilities under GAP III, including that gender equality is a core priority and must be an integral part of the political agenda in the same way as the other subjects considered as priorities.
- Intensify dialogue with political parties through the work of CSOs and other expert organisations and address the **necessity for reserved seats/quotas** for women candidates in the list of political parties. Political parties should formally commit and set voluntary targets for gender parity in their lists. CSOs should also be able to oversee the implementation of these targets.

Promoting women's direct political participation

- Develop more awareness and communication campaigns on the **benefits of gender equality for society as a whole**, including men, by breaking with the notion that it is only for the benefit of women.
- Strengthen advocacy initiatives for the development and effective implementation of **favorable legal framework** for women's participation.
- Support **long-term advocacy initiatives** by local women's organisations, NGOs and networks and prioritise support for CSOs synergies and (formal and informal) coalitions in advocacy projects. Promote their implementation by making it a clear objective in calls for proposals.
- Provide **capacity-building** to women's leagues of political parties and promote collaboration of women candidates across and between the main political parties through, for example, women's caucus and (informal) exchange sessions. Strengthen programmes on positive masculinity within political parties.
- Stimulate and support the capacity building and **political mentoring** of women political candidates at all levels (formal policy, activism, development, economic...)
 - Provide capacity building and strengthen women candidates' knowledge about leadership, democratic values, ethics in politics and civic engagement.

- Provide training in political skills such as fundraising, campaigning, communication and debating.
- Organise debates with women candidates and their constituencies on the need to address specific gender issues and how to address those politically.
- Promote voluntary pre-electoral public commitments (written and signed) by women candidates with a special focus on gender issues.
- Monitor and oversee the commitments of the elected women by their constituency during their mandate(s).

Promoting women's political participation through voting

- Support and stimulate **meaningful political debate** at a local level to promote a more conscience voting behavior.
- Support initiatives that ensure the registration of **the new generation of women voters**. For example, “committees of engaged citizens” could be formed and civic pro-democracy movements, churches and women CSOs could be deployed to promote the registration among the population, with an emphasis on the new generation of women voters. Support these committees to accompany men and women to effectively overcome barriers to exercise their right to vote (documentation, transport, knowledge of the procedures and the democratic rights, etc.).
- Support **trained and engaged women** to engage post-elections in public monitoring and oversight processes regarding the work of the politicians that represent their territory.
- Conduct **research** during and after the elections regarding the actual participation of women and young women in voting process.

For more information

Contact

Teodora Nguen

Advocacy officer

teodora.nguen@eurac-network.org

+32 493 35 52 44

www.eurac-network.org

Read our policy report



[“Promoting gender equality. European rhetoric in view of the facts. Challenges and lessons learned for transformative European support for women's political and civic participation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda”](#), EurAc, 2019.

Disclaimer

The information contained in this document was gathered up to 10 November 2021. Consequently, any major event happening after this date will not be featured. We advise that you make use of the contents accordingly.

The analysis and recommendations in this document were elaborated by EurAc's secretariat with the approval and collaboration of its membership. However, the position of individual member organisations on specific points may differ from the position of the network.