



Government Offices of Sweden



MINISTRY
OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS



Summit for Democracy Cohort on Gender Equality as a Prerequisite for Democracy Media Freedom

INTRODUCTORY OVERVIEW

Gender equality is an imperative for thriving democracies. Any effort to build strong democracies and inclusive institutions will be flawed if it excludes or marginalizes half the world's population. Countries where women prosper also tend to be healthier democracies.¹ Hence, empowering women and safeguarding democracy go together; gender equality is a prerequisite for inclusive democracy.

Around the world, gender equality and women's rights to participate in public life are being undermined by the same forces that are pushing back on democracy. For instance, gendered disinformation and online abuse against women in politics are increasingly used to erode the gains on gender equality, women's empowerment and democracy. Efforts towards more inclusive and equitable democracy are taking place but need to be strengthened and accelerated.

The recommendations of the Summit for Democracy's Gender Cohort, co-led by Sweden, Romania, the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS) and International IDEA, provide suggestions to strengthen democracy by striving for gender equality. Considering the close link between gender equality, democracy and media freedom, we encourage the Government of the Netherlands to consider the outlined recommendations when hosting the upcoming regional event on media freedom.

¹ "Exploring the Links between Women's Status and Democracy", Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2023. <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/resource/exploring-the-links-between-womens-status-anddemocracy/>

GENDER & MEDIA FREEDOM

Media freedom and the safety of women journalists are fundamental to the strength of democratic processes and institutions. Yet, women are not equally represented in the media. A 2020 study of the news media in the UK, US, Kenya, India, South Africa and Nigeria found that women comprised only 15–30 percent of the subjects of news reports.² A Reuters study found that “in 11 out of 12 [major media] markets, the majority of top editors are men, including countries like Brazil and Finland where women outnumber men among working journalists.”³ Unfair treatment of women journalists, or failing to cover women in politics on equal terms, curtails women’s freedom of expression—an equal right.

The presence of women in the media is related to the amount and nature of the coverage of women and girls and their ability to see women leaders as role models, including in politics. For example, a recent OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) study found that a major reason that young women opt out of considering political life is the way women are presented in the media and sexist comments that make them fearful.⁴ Democratic expression is undermined when the media is not representative of women or when women journalists lack the ability to work safely. This affects power dynamics in all corners of society, including for women in politics. A safe, enabling environment is required for robust, free media and for women journalists to thrive. Women in politics deserve to have their policy concerns reflected in public discourse and to receive media coverage that emphasizes their substantive and policy positions rather than their appearance and personal life. The following recommendations offer concrete actions to strengthen media freedom, promote gender equality and build democratic resilience.

² Kassova, L. (2020), “The Missing Perspectives of Women in News, (pdf, 27.3 MB)” International Women’s Media Foundation, p.27.

³ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/women-and-leadership-news-media-2021-evidence-12-markets>

⁴ https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/women-government-and-policy-making-in-oecd-countries_9789264210745-en#page8

RECOMMENDATIONS

Eliminate violence against women in politics (VAWIP) and address the proliferation of technology-facilitated gender-based violence and abuse.

- **Proposed action:** Adopt legal standards on zero tolerance for all forms of gender-based violence including online and between/within political parties. Recognize hate speech against women in politics and the media as a cybercrime and form of gender-based violence.
- **Proposed action:** Address technology facilitated gender-based violence and abuse in collaboration with social media companies. Increase coordination between online platforms and law enforcement entities in order to identify and respond to threats and hold perpetrators accountable.

Identify and address harmful and discriminatory gender norms and practices in journalism, media coverage, and social media.

- **Proposed action:** Encourage media actors to recognize and address gender stereotypes in the coverage of women in politics and promote a culture of equity and equality.

Work collaboratively to develop strategies and tools to mitigate risks to women politicians, human rights defenders, civil society leaders, and journalists.

- **Proposed action:** Partner with democratic governments, civil society, law enforcement, women politicians and women journalists to develop strategies to identify and respond to risks women face; tools to track and report threats and violent incidents; and rapid response plans.
- **Proposed action:** Provide women journalists with security training to mitigate threats and access to resources that increase safety.