




The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

Women in politics Lithuania, 3-4 June 2025

Comments paper – Malta



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This publication is supported by the European Union Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (2021-2027).

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Barriers and Breakthroughs: Women's Political Participation and Gender Equality Reforms in Malta

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Abstract

The Gender Balance Reform in Malta, first implemented in 2022, represents a transformative advancement in parliamentary representation, doubling female representation from 14% to 28%. This achievement was driven by the formation of cross-party alliances and the active involvement of key political and civil society actors, which together secured the broad consensus necessary for constitutional amendment. Framed as a historic milestone, the reform followed earlier internal party initiatives, including voluntary quotas and structural changes. A comprehensive consultative process that engaged diverse stakeholders, legal experts, and utilising action research, ensured a transparent, inclusive, and evidence-based approach that guided both the development and successful implementation of the reform.

1. Country context

1.1 Disrupting the historical stagnation

Despite the extension of voting rights to women in 1947, female representation in Parliament remained persistently low, with only 26 women elected between 1947 and 2017 (Sammut, 2017; Azzopardi, 2021) and women were under-represented in key positions within parties. Previously, softer efforts by political parties to address this imbalance through voluntary quotas had limited success. The Labour Party implemented internal quotas in the late 1990s, while the Nationalist Party achieved gender parity in its Executive Council by 2014. However, neither party applied quotas to candidate selection, as this would have risked displacing male incumbents and potentially alienating some supporters.

Despite progress in women's education and workforce participation, where women have comprised 60% of university graduates since the 1990s and labour force participation rose to 53% by 2020 (Baldacchino, 2019), parliamentary representation remained low, fluctuating between 10 and 14%. This led to a debate and the setting up of a technical committee that proposed the Gender Balance Reform, which laid out a number of measures to boost women's participation, including the "Gender Corrective Mechanism". When implemented this led to a historic increase in female MPs, raising their share to 28% (22 out of 79 MPs), marking a significant turning point in Malta's political landscape.

1.2 Structural and Institutional Barriers

As long as there were few MPs, few were in a position to be considered for cabinet and the shadow cabinet. In almost 80 years, there were merely 13 women who served in cabinet as ministers or parliamentary secretaries (see [Appendix 1](#)). One must add that there were not enough women parliamentarians to cover most of the Parliamentary committees. Current structural challenges include:

- There is no Gender Equality Strategic Plan for Parliament, nor a dedicated budget for its implementation. This reinforces gendered party dynamics, where women's influence and visibility are often diminished.
- A lack of safeguards for the prevention of and redressing of gender-based discrimination.
- No tools or procedures to prevent and investigate sexual harassment.
- Lack of full-time MP options on a voluntary basis and for flexibility in political roles.
- Unfriendly parliamentary working hours where schedules may disadvantage women, especially those with caregiving responsibilities.
- No child-care facilities in Parliament, which disproportionately affects women MPs and discourages potential candidates. The social and private division of labour still burdens women with more domestic responsibilities, leaving less time for public participation (Gender Balance Reform, 2019).
- In recent years cyberbullying and cyberviolence have become another discouraging factor for women to contest elections. Women report they are victims of cyberviolence in a disproportionate manner (Calleja, 2025).

Although the Proportional Representation-Single Transferable Vote (PR-STV) system, explained in [Appendix 2](#), has been cited as favourable to women its intra-party competition structure, where candidates from the same party compete in the same district, can be divisive. This dynamic has allowed some male candidates to weaponise gendered stereotypes to undermine female contenders. Women in politics frequently face inadequate support structures, making it difficult to sustain their roles. Challenges include limited access to campaign funding, particularly at local levels, and a broader lack of financial transparency that favours well-connected candidates backed by powerful interest groups. As a result, the Labour Party's 2017 manifesto acknowledged gender quotas as "positive measures" toward balanced representation and proposed public consultation that led to concrete legal solutions (Labour Party, 2017). The formal reform process that ensued, involved input from key stakeholders on technical and legal frameworks.

1.3 Policy Reform: The Gender Balance Reform

There were 4 proposed pillars of the Gender Balance Reform:

- **The “Gender Corrective Mechanism”:** This entailed changes in the Constitution and the Electoral Law whereby positive measures were adopted to allocate 12 additional seats in Parliament for the ‘under-represented sex’ if their share in

Parliament falls below 40%. The amendments were approved in 2021 and implemented in 2022.

- **A cross-party committee promoting gender mainstreaming and creating a strategy for gender equality in parliament.** A proposal was made for a cross-party committee, functioning like a Women's Parliamentary Caucus. Yet, the Gender Equality and Mainstreaming Strategy and Action Plan (2022) for the 14th legislature that emphasised integrating a gender perspective and intersectionality across all policy areas, did not outline specific cross-party collaboration efforts within Parliament.
- **Ensuring women gain critical influence in the Electoral Commission.** Another key proposal was to ensure gender balance within the Electoral Commission, which had been entirely male until the legal amendment in 2021. Additionally, it was suggested that the Commission's role be expanded to include conducting gender audits of political parties as a condition for receiving state funding for candidate training.
- **State funding to support parties to attract candidates from under-represented groups.** State funding to political parties was proposed to incentivise them to recruit, train and support candidates to promote gender balance. The subject of state funding to parties remains an unresolved matter of national controversy and hence this proposal was not implemented.

1.3.1 Evaluation and Analysis

Government framed the Gender Balance Reform as part of a broader progressive agenda aimed at challenging democratic deficits. It highlighted the slow pace of change and the failure of voluntary measures to address gender imbalance in politics, which prompted the need for stronger reforms. The Constitutional amendments, were supported by two-thirds of a male-dominated Parliament. The Gender Corrective Mechanism gained near-unanimous approval due to strategic alliances and advocacy by women across key sectors. The Mechanism was deemed a success by its proponents because it increased numerical representation in Parliament, i.e. at a 'descriptive level' (Childs, 2008). The level of support for female candidates in 2022 was comparable to that of previous elections, marginally higher than in 2017. In total, 10 women (14.9%) won one of the five seats in Parliament allocated to each one of the 13 districts. Thus, in the General election of March 2022, other top ranked six performing candidates from the under-represented sex from each of the two political parties in Parliament were declared elected (Bencini, 2022).

1.3.2 Misinformation and pushback

Despite the significance of this achievement, it was marred by a continuing adversarial narrative, likely stemming from a widespread misunderstanding of Malta's complex electoral system and opponents to affirmative action. In PR-STV each vote and preference holds meaningful weight in determining the result (Bezzina & Sammut, 2023). Yet, an adversarial narrative overlooked new candidates who were not elected in the first counts, which Cutajar (2014) had described as 'neophytes', who typically may require more counts and therefore more time to reach the quota for their district

and subsequent by-elections. The full composition of Parliament is only finalised once all vote transfers and counting processes are concluded.

Before the 2022 election vote counting was even concluded, a premature newspaper article misleadingly claimed that only four women had been elected to Parliament and asserted that the reform had failed since significantly fewer women were elected on their own merit. This argument was reasserted in an academic paper penned by Cutajar (2024), which further galvanised the narrative. It was later echoed by the President of the European Parliament, a known opponent of quotas (Calleja, C., 2025a) and the erroneous facts were also reproduced on the official website of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (UPI, 2022).

1.3.3 Ambiguous substantive results

Public support for the Gender Balance Reform initially grew following endorsements by key political figures, shifting attitudes that had previously favoured party-level quotas over legislative ones. Surveys published by Sansone (2019) and Bezzina, Brown, and Marmarà (2021) documented increased support for both the reform (69.2% and 66.5%) and for a gender-balanced Parliament (88.5%), suggesting strong public backing for broader gender equality measures. However, by 2024, support had declined, partly due to changes in the political climate and party leaderships together with the incomplete implementation of the proposed reform. There was also a widespread perception that increased female representation had not translated into substantive policy outcomes (Sammut, 2022).

Malta's Gender Corrective Mechanism has furthermore faced two legal challenges questioning its fairness and constitutionality, but both cases were dismissed by the court.

1.3.4 Abuse of the system

Concerns have emerged over the misuse of the Gender Corrective Mechanism in intra-party dynamics, with some female candidates being targeted by whisper campaigns that exacerbated prior gendered stereotypes related to motherhood, ambition, and appearance. One female candidate attributed the loss of her seat to the mechanism itself claiming that male contenders encouraged voters not to vote for her because she would eventually be elected by means of the Mechanism. While such challenges persist, female politicians may need to secure stronger accountability structures within their parties and where necessary publicly expose such whisper campaigns. Another notable case involved candidate Janice Chetcuti who ceded her own seat to a male colleague, only to later use affirmative measures to get herself elected (Times of Malta, 2022a). This case has exposed a loophole not anticipated during consultations and highlights the need for legal amendments to protect the mechanism's credibility and prevent strategic exploitation.

2. Under Representation in local elections

Another electoral pledge arises from the Labour Party manifesto (2022) that is committed to promote a gender balance in local government. Malta has 68 Local Councils, functioning as statutory local government authorities also elected via the

PR-STV system. While these councils are constitutionally recognised, there is currently no affirmative measures in place, though efforts to promote female participation are ongoing (Labour Manifesto, 2022; Government, 2022). A 2023 reform (Act No. XLI of 2023) allowed individuals aged 16 and over to serve as Mayor or Deputy Mayor, signalling a push for greater youth involvement. Despite these reforms, women remain underrepresented, particularly in leadership: only 7 of 65 Mayors elected in 2024 were women. Although women's representation in local councils (28.2%) is higher than in the previous national elections before the Gender Corrective Mechanism (Laiviera, 2024), it still falls short of the 40% often cited as necessary for gender balance as per [Appendix 3](#). Encouragingly, younger women are approaching a 33% participation threshold. This is considered the point of 'critical mass' (Waylen, 2007) though this may be influenced by less caregiving responsibilities in this age group.

Over the past 30 years, female representation in Malta's local governance has risen from 13.5% to approximately 28%, without any affirmative measures. However, in the June 2024 local elections, six councils were composed entirely of men, primarily due to a lack of female candidates in those localities (see [Appendix 4](#)). In contrast, six other local councils have female majorities, reflecting strong female candidacy ([Appendix 5](#)). As Lane (2008) noted, women are more likely to succeed when they have numerically robust and well-supported candidacies.

3. Elections for the European Parliament

While Malta's membership in the EU in the enlargement of 2004 generated optimism, women candidates collectively secured only 20% of votes in MEP elections up to the 2008 elections. No Maltese women were elected as Members of the European Parliament during this period. It was only after some male MEPs returned to Malta to assume senior political roles at a national level that the potential for increased female representation at the European level began to emerge. It was in these by-elections that the first female MEPs including the Current European Parliament President Roberta Metsola, first obtained their seats. Because of their successful incumbency, in the 2014 European Parliament elections, there was so much promise that women achieved a historic milestone by securing four out of the six available Maltese MEP seats. This was the first time a female majority was elected in any Maltese election as per [Appendix 6](#). Maltese political parties found it relatively easier to encourage women to stand for the European Parliament compared to national elections, partly due to the perception that EU institutions are more conducive to gender equality and family life than the Maltese national parliament. However, despite these efforts, the situation appears to have regressed, as evidenced by the results of the 2024 elections, where female representation declined sharply.

4. Transferable aspects

Lessons from Lithuania reveal that gains in women's political representation are fragile and prone to stagnation or reversal and we must ensure that this is not allowed to happen. While alignment with EU standards has guided national targets, efforts

centered on awareness, education, and data collection require strong enforcement mechanisms to be effective. Cultural change alone is insufficient, as persistent voter bias favours male candidates and many women remain hesitant to enter politics. The Maltese experience highlights that meaningful progress demands not only robust interventions but also strong political commitment to drive and sustain gender parity reforms.

Like Malta, Belgium's experience demonstrates that mandatory gender quotas effectively increase women's political representation; however, further reforms are necessary to achieve substantive gender equality. This highlights the potential importance of establishing Women's Parliamentary Caucuses (WPCs), i.e. cross-party groups of female legislators, aimed at supporting women parliamentarians and advancing gender equality within legislative bodies. Structural, cultural, and media-related barriers continue to restrict women's access to full equality. Maltese women politicians are frequently portrayed through a gendered lens that emphasises appearance and family roles, a dynamic intensified by persistent 'benevolent sexism' within parties and the media, manifesting as mansplaining, limited speaking opportunities, and the relegation of women to stereotypically feminine policy areas. Moreover, women with intersecting identities in Malta particularly those with disabilities and from minority ethnic backgrounds, face compounded challenges too. To consolidate recent progress in Malta, sustained, intersectional, and multi-level strategies are imperative, complemented by support mechanisms such as mentoring and training to promote women's continued political participation and leadership development.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Sustained progress requires long-term investment in political education, institutional collaboration, and cultural transformation to translate numerical gains into meaningful policy influence. Key recommendations include the development of a Strategic Plan for Gender Mainstreaming in Parliament, ideally supported by a cross-partisan commission or Women's Parliamentary Caucus (Gender Balance Reform, 2019). Media's influential role in shaping public understanding highlights the need for clearer and coherent communication strategies, as public discourse has often been muddled due to the technical complexity of the reforms and the absence of a sustained explanatory campaign to respond to misinformation and pushback. Efforts should also focus on expanding structural support for female candidates, including enhanced funding, mentorship, and training programmes, alongside improved transparency in financing of campaigns. Measures should be adopted to support candidates at a local, national and European level. To safeguard the Gender Balance Reform's integrity, legal frameworks must be introduced to prevent strategic exploitation and address gendered disinformation or whisper campaigns.

Further, electoral reform should become more inclusive of smaller parties and independents through revised allocation mechanisms if representation thresholds are met. Finally, systematic monitoring and evaluation of the Gender Balance Reform are essential to ensure that gains are substantive and to assess the impact before the planned sunset clause that expires in 2041.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Female Cabinet Members in Maltese Parliaments Since 1947

Name	Party	Position(s) Held	Years Active in Cabinet
Agatha Barbara	Labour	Minister for Education and Culture, Minister for Labour, Welfare, and Culture	1955-1958 1971-1981
Giovanna Debono	Nationalist	Minister for Gozo	1998-2013
Helena Dalli	Labour	Parliamentary Secretary for Women's Rights, Social Dialogue, Consumer Affairs & Civil Rights	1996-1998, 2013-2019
Giovanna Debono	Nationalist	Minister for Gozo	1998-2013
Dolores Cristina	Nationalist	Parliamentary Secretary for Social Housing and Gender Equality. Minister for Family, Education, Employment	2003-2004 2004-2013
Helen D' Amato	Nationalist	Parliamentary Secretary for the Elderly and Community Care	2004-2008
Marie-Louis Colerio Preca	Labour	Minister for the Family and Social Solidarity	2013-2014
Justyne Caruana	Labour	Parliamentary Secretary for Rights of Persons with Disability and Active Ageing Minister for Gozo Minister for Education	2014-2017

			2017-2020 2020- 2021
Julia Farrugia Portelli	Labour	Parliamentary Secretary for Reforms, Citizenship and Simplification of Administrative Processes Minister for Tourism and consumer right Minister for Inclusion and the Voluntary Sector	2017–2020 2020-2022 2022-present
Rosianne Cutajar	Labour	Parliamentary Secretary for Equality and Reforms	2020–2022
Miriam Dalli	Labour	Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Sustainable Development Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Environment	2020–2022 2022-present
Rebecca Buttigieg	Labour	Parliamentary Secretary for Equality and Reforms	2022-present
Alison Zerafa Civelli	Labour	Parliamentary Secretary for Local Government	2022-present
Alicia Bugeja Said	Labour	Parliamentary Secretary for Fisheries, Aquaculture, and Animal Rights	2022-present

Appendix 2: How PR-STV Works in Malta

Under the Proportional Representation–Single Transferable Vote (PR-STV) system, voters rank candidates in order of preference (1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.) on a ballot that lists candidates alphabetically by party and includes independents.

Voters can rank as many or as few candidates as they wish, and may cross party lines in their preferences, making the system highly flexible and voter-driven.

The system is considered complex but highly democratic, as voter preferences can override party organization choices.

In practice, however, most Maltese voters remain loyal to a single party—by 2021, 83% always voted for the same party, and transfers between parties have historically been minimal (about 1%).

Districts and Representation

Malta is divided into 13 districts, each electing five MPs, though this number can increase if corrective mechanisms for majority or gender balance are triggered. Apart from the 13th District (the islands of Gozo and Comino), all districts must have voter populations within $\pm 5\%$ of the average district size.

Criticisms and Defences of STV

Critics argue:

- a) **Complex Counting:** While voting is simple, the counting process is lengthy and complex, though electronic counting has sped this up.
- b) **Colonial Legacy:** STV is seen as a holdover from British rule, used mainly in smaller nations (Malta, Ireland, parts of Australia).

Defenders argue that STV remains one of the fairest systems for proportional representation that is suitable for small contexts.

Political Impact in Malta

Initially, STV encouraged multi-party representation, but since 1966 Malta has functioned as a two-party system (Partit Laburista and Partit Nazzjonalista). No third party has won seats since 1962.

Although STV should yield proportional results, the 1981 election saw a party win a majority of votes but fewer seats, due to the five-seat-per-district rule and "wasted votes." This led to a constitutional crisis. Hence, the "majority corrective mechanism" was introduced in 1987 (and revised in 1996 and 2007) to ensure that a party winning the majority of first-preference votes also secures a parliamentary majority.

Gender Corrective Mechanism

To address gender imbalance, a mechanism allows up to 12 additional seats to be allocated to the underrepresented sex if their share in Parliament falls below 40%. (Bezzina & Sammut, 2023).

Appendix 3

Local Council Elections

Year (sample)	Seats for Women (%)
1993/94	13.5
2003/04	17.2
2013/14	18.3
2019	25.9
2024	28.2

Parliamentary Elections

Year (Sample)	Seat for women (%)
1992	1.5
2002	9.2
2013	7.7
2017	13.4
2022	15.3
+12 seats (Gender Balance Reform)	29.1

Electoral Commission (2024)

https://electoral.gov.mt/Contents/Item/Display/78078?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Appendix 4

Localities with no female representation

All Male Local Councils	Female Candidature (%)
Dingli	No female candidates
Għajnsielem	One female candidate (PL)
Luqa	No female candidates
Pieta'	One female candidate (ADPD)
San Lawrenz	One female candidate (PN)
Imtarfa	No female candidates

Source: Electoral Commission (2024)

https://electoral.gov.mt/Contents/Item/Display/78078?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Appendix 5

Majority Female Councils	Female Candidature (%)
Għargħur	50%
Kalkara	33%
Kirkop	50%
Qrendi	57%
Santa Luċija	56%
Swieqi	50%

Source: Electoral Commission (2024)

https://electoral.gov.mt/Contents/Item/Display/78078?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Appendix 6: Women Elected as MEPs from Malta (2004–2024)

Election Year	% Female Candidates	Women Elected	Men Elected	Notes
2004	7.4%	0	6	No women elected
2009	23.5%	0	6	No women elected
2013 (by-elections)	N/A	3	3	First women MEPs via by-elections
2014	25%	4	2	Parity achieved; major breakthrough
2019	N/A	3	3	Parity maintained
2024	N/A	1	5	Sharp decline in women's representation

Source: Compiled by Perplexity AI (12 May 2025)