



The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

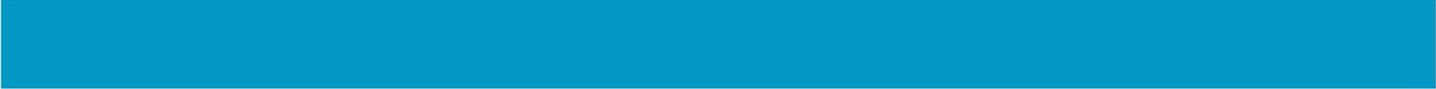
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Women's Political Participation in Estonia

Maarja Tinn

Think Tank Praxis

Abstract

Women's political participation in Estonia remains limited due to the absence of quotas, underrepresentation in leadership, and persistent gender norms. Although some initiatives – like the Pay Mirror platform and Equal Pay Day campaigns – support greater equality, structural reforms have been modest. The upcoming accession to the CEDAW Optional Protocol marks a step forward. To ensure equal participation, Estonia should adopt special measures, strengthen party-level support, and promote norm change through data and peer learning.

1. Relevant Country Context

1.1 Overview

Estonia's overall progress in gender equality remains modest, especially in the domains of political and economic decision-making. According to the 2024 [Gender Equality Index](#) (EIGE), Estonia scores 60.8 points, ranking 21st among EU Member States, and falling 10.2 points below the EU average. While Estonia performs relatively well in the domain of work (7th place), it ranks 24th in the domain of power, with significant gender imbalances in political and corporate leadership.

Women currently account for:

- 30% of national parliament members
- 29% of municipal council members
- 33% of government ministers, down from 47% in 2023¹
- Only 13% of executive board members in the largest publicly listed companies

There are no legislative candidate quotas or placement mandates in Estonia, and party structures remain largely autonomous in candidate selection.

1.2 Legal and Strategic Framework

Estonia lacks binding gender quotas but implements gender equality through:

¹ As of 25 March 2025, women make up only 30% of ministers, marking a further decline in female representation in the government.

- [The Gender Equality Act](#) (2004) and the [Equal Treatment Act](#) (2009), which prohibit discrimination and ensure equal opportunities.
- [The Welfare Development Plan 2023–2030](#), which includes a dedicated sub-goal (Sub-goal 5) to promote gender equality and equal treatment across all societal sectors, including leadership and political participation (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2023).

Although Estonia has made strategic commitments, implementation is limited and uneven, especially in ensuring women's equal representation in decision-making.

1.3 Challenges and Obstacles

Barriers to women's political participation in Estonia are both structural and cultural. According to the 2024 [Eurobarometer](#), only 31% of respondents in Estonia believe that temporary special measures would be useful for increasing women's political participation (9% totally agree and 22% tend to agree) – one of the lowest support levels in the EU, compared to the EU average of 43%. In the same survey, 64% of men and 55% of women believe a woman's primary role is to care for her family, and 58% of men and 54% of women believe a man's primary role is to earn money. 38% of the population think men make better leaders than women, though 60% agree that gender-balanced leadership is more effective.

Structural inequalities reinforce these perceptions. According to Eurostat, Estonia had a [gender pay gap](#) of 16.9% in 2023 – the sixth highest in the EU, whereas in previous years Estonia ranked first. Women are significantly [underrepresented](#) in politics, public administration, and corporate leadership. Moreover, only around [20% of parental benefit recipients are men](#), and taking parental leave is widely viewed as career-damaging for men.

These interlinked norms and systemic disadvantages continue to constrain women's access to political leadership and decision-making roles.

2. Policy Debate

Although Estonia has made progress in data collection, monitoring and public awareness, debate around structural reforms remains limited. Gender equality in politics is not a high-profile issue, and binding measures such as quotas are not on the legislative agenda.

While the [Welfare Development Plan 2023–2030](#) sets relevant objectives – including reducing the gender pay gap, promoting work-life balance, and achieving gender balance in decision-making – it lacks enforcement mechanisms. No major political party has adopted voluntary gender quotas, and women remain underrepresented in internal party leadership structures.

[The UN CEDAW Committee](#) has repeatedly called on Estonia to adopt temporary special measures, including legislative quotas, to enhance women's political representation. These recommendations have so far not led to significant reform.

In March 2025, the Estonian Parliament advanced a bill to accede to the [Optional Protocol to the UN CEDAW Convention](#), allowing individuals and organisations to submit complaints directly to the CEDAW Committee. The step, long recommended by the Chancellor of Justice, would improve access to justice for gender-based discrimination and bring Estonia in line with international human rights mechanisms.

3. Good Practice Examples

3.1 Palgapeegel ("Pay Mirror") Platform

[Palgapeegel](#) is a digital, registry-based analytics tool developed by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications in cooperation with Statistics Estonia, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and the Labour Inspectorate. It provides automated analysis of gender pay gaps and employment structures using administrative data already submitted by employers.

Features:

- Accessible to employers via the Labour Inspectorate's self-service portal
- Available to all employers with at least 3 men and 3 women employees
- Confidential and non-mandatory: results are visible only to the employer
- Indicators include average and median pay by gender, gender composition by occupation, and horizontal/vertical segregation

Policy Significance:

- Forms part of Estonia's preparations to implement the EU Pay Transparency Directive by 2026
- The government has emphasised that obligations must be clear, proportional, and sensitive to organisational size
- Enables organisations to detect unjustified wage discrepancies and improve fairness and transparency
- Supports partial automation of supervisory functions and assists employers in fulfilling legal obligations under the Gender Equality Act

Though not specific to the political sphere, Palgapeegel exemplifies data-driven governance and could inspire similar tools for monitoring representation in public institutions and party structures.

3.2 Equal Pay Day Campaigns

Equal Pay Day is marked annually in Estonia to raise awareness of the gender pay gap. Coordinated by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, the campaign highlights how unequal pay contributes to economic dependency and limits women's leadership and political participation. In 2024, Equal Pay Day fell on 17

February, illustrating a narrowing but still significant earnings gap between women and men.

3.3 Supporting Political Equality Through Data and Awareness

According to the 2021–2022 [Gender Equality Monitoring Survey](#), support for women’s political participation in Estonia is relatively strong, but persistent stereotypes remain. 85% of women and 72% of men agree that women’s involvement in politics helps represent diverse interests. However, about one third believe women are less interested in leadership, and fewer men than women reject the idea that women lack the necessary skills. Support for gender balance in politics is higher than in business leadership, where men remain more sceptical.

To complement policy frameworks, Estonia has seen several research-led and awareness-raising initiatives that address these attitudinal and structural barriers.

One such initiative is the 2020 Praxis [report](#) “Women in Politics: On the Way Towards Gender Balance”. The project analysed the obstacles women face in political careers – including limited access to leadership positions, weak party support structures, and gendered media portrayals – and offered targeted recommendations for parties, media, and institutions to enhance gender equality in political life.

In 2024, Praxis published a [study](#) on the normalisation of sexism and misogyny in Estonia’s media landscape. Funded by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications and conducted in cooperation with the University of Tartu, the research analysed the traditional media portrayal of male and female politicians. It revealed that women politicians are often framed in ways that diminish their credibility and visibility compared to their male counterparts. The study highlighted the media’s influential role in shaping public attitudes toward political leadership and called for greater editorial responsibility to ensure fair and balanced representation.

Finally, initiatives like [Girls’ Takeover Day](#) (#TüdrukudVõtavadÜle), held annually in cooperation with Junior Achievement Estonia and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, engage girls in shadowing leaders in politics, media, and business, helping challenge gender stereotypes and broaden aspirations.

Together, these initiatives reflect a growing emphasis on combining data, public engagement, and evidence-based advocacy to foster structural and cultural change.

4. Transferability

Examples from Belgium and Lithuania offer useful inspiration for Estonia. Belgium’s legislated quotas and rank-order mandates help ensure gender-balanced candidate lists. Lithuania demonstrates how NGO-led initiatives can effectively foster women’s empowerment through public engagement, campaigning, and grassroots training.

Estonia has not yet adopted binding measures such as political candidate quotas, and public support for such tools remains limited. However, several domestic initiatives illustrate alternative pathways to change. As described in Section 3.3, Estonia has made use of data-driven tools, awareness campaigns, media analysis, and youth-focused initiatives to address cultural and structural barriers to women's political participation.

These efforts suggest that Estonia's strength may lie in combining strategic use of data and research with targeted engagement activities. While less formalised than quota systems, such approaches can help build public awareness, shift norms, and pave the way for broader institutional reforms. Furthermore, these models may offer transferable insights for other countries with similar political cultures or low support for binding measures.

In this sense, Estonia's experience highlights the potential of research-led and civil society-driven interventions to complement formal equality policies – especially in contexts where political will for legislative change remains limited.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

To advance women's political participation, Estonia should adopt an integrated strategy combining legislative measures, institutional support, and cultural change.

At the national level, key steps include:

- Introducing temporary special measures, such as gender quotas or placement mandates;
- Supporting internal party reforms to ensure equal opportunities, such as leadership pipelines and mentoring;
- Funding training programmes and research-based awareness initiatives to increase public understanding and acceptance of equality measures, including quotas;
- Enhancing intersectional data collection to guide policy and measure progress;
- Addressing the growing attitudinal divide among young men and women by integrating gender equality, media literacy, and anti-misogyny content into education and youth engagement strategies.

At the European level, Estonia should:

- Support standards for gender-balanced representation;
- Promote peer learning and knowledge exchange across member states;
- Invest in cross-border awareness campaigns to challenge stereotypes and showcase diverse models of women's leadership;
- Make greater use of EIGE tools and comparative data to strengthen evidence-based policymaking.

These combined actions can help remove systemic barriers, shift cultural norms, and ensure that women are equally represented in Estonia's political life – both now and in future generations.

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