



Equal Voices? Gender dynamics in parliamentary debates

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Abstract

The increasing participation of women in politics marks a meaningful step toward more inclusive and representative legislative institutions. This paper explores how Members of Parliament (MPs) in Albania engage in and influence legislative debates within parliamentary committees, with a particular focus on gendered experiences. It focuses on the internal dynamics of two key committees: The Committee on Economy and Finance and the Committee on Labour, Social Issues and Health. The paper draws insights from in-depth interviews with MPs from these committees. The participants represent different political parties, with varying positions within their parties and different numbers of terms served in Parliament. Special attention is given to the perspectives of women MPs, who reflect on their roles on how they navigate political debates, seek information, and respond to institutional and political constraints. Moreover, the paper analyses the increased presence of women in Parliament, particularly after the implementation of the gender quota. While some MPs note a shift toward greater attention to social policies following the gender quota, others highlighted ongoing challenges to achieve equal voice. The paper contributes to the limited but growing literature on gender and politics in Albania. The findings also inform broader academic discussions on women in politics and democratic development.

Keywords: women in politics; legislative narratives; policymaking; social policy.

1. Introduction

Women's increased participation has strengthened the inclusivity of Albania's legislature, particularly over the past two decades through legal and political reforms. This paper examines how Albanian MPs engage in legislative debates within two key committees—Economy and

Finance, and Labour, Social Issues and Health—focusing on the gendered experiences that shape their participation and influence policy priorities.

1.1 Women’s political participation and gender quotas

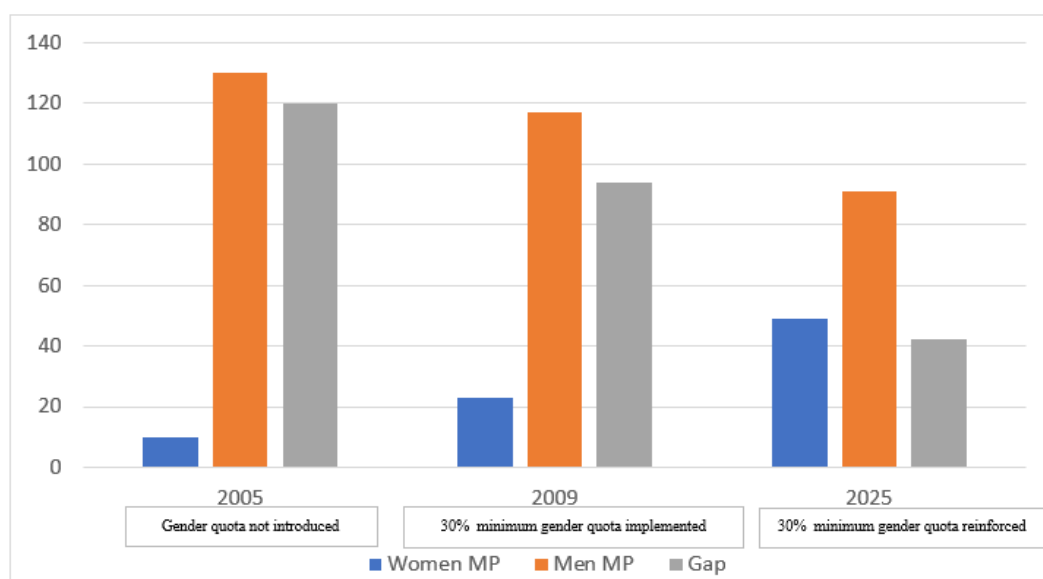
Central to legal and social transformations in Albania has been the implementation of gender quotas in both local and central government institutions. The introduction of gender quotas has resulted in a notable rise in women’s representation in the Albanian Parliament and local councils (UN Women Albania, 2021). While gender quotas are often seen as a mechanism to accelerate gender parity, they are also expected to empower women in political roles to shape policy agendas, particularly in domains such as social welfare, healthcare, education, and gender equality. Nevertheless, the presence of elected women does not certainly translate into substantive representation or meaningful influence or policy outcomes (Franceschet et al., 2012). Therefore, programmes that support women’s participation in governance are vital for reducing gender gaps in resources, decision-making, and political power (Markham, 2012). In this context, the adoption of the Law on Gender Equality in Society (2018) formally established gender quotas for decision-making positions and marked an important step toward achieving gender parity in governance. This was followed by a revision of the electoral quota to strengthen equitable representation at both local and national levels.

1.2 Dimensions of representation and historical context

The survey from Women Political Leaders (2022) shows that a higher presence of women in top decision-making roles correlates with stronger legal frameworks on socio-economic and gender equality. Women’s political representation encompasses two interrelated dimensions: descriptive - numbers of women holding elected office (Franceschet et al., 2012) and substantive - the degree to which women in office advocate that women’s voices are heard (Wäckerle & Castanho Silva, 2023). Although these dimensions often intersect, they can also conflict and highlight that numerical inclusion does not guarantee meaningful change in policy substance or institutional culture. For instance, Lloren (2015) argues that women’s political influence is shaped by multiple factors, including political experience, party ideology, institutional support, and connections with constituents. Moreover, countries with larger gender gaps are likely to adopt quotas to increase women’s presence in politics (Beauregard, 2017).

Albania provides a concrete example of the complex relationship between these two dimensions (Metaj & Kalaja, 2024). Albanian women first exercised their right to vote in the Constitutional Assembly elections of December 2, 1945, with six women elected as MPs (Bushati et al., 2023). The first multi-party elections in 1991 saw only nine women elected out of 223 MPs (Lamani, 2003). To address these gaps in descriptive representation, Albania adopted gender quota legislation in 2009. The Electoral Code (2021) requires that at least one in every three candidates on a party list must be from the underrepresented gender. Albania’s regional proportional electoral system with multi-member lists facilitates this process (Central Election Commission), that enables women candidates to be elected although placed down on the party list (Wängnerud, 2009).

Figure 1. Women and men in parliament before and after gender quotas



Source: INSTAT, 2023; Albanian Parliament, 2025; Balkanweb, 2025

In 2005, prior to the quota reform, women held only 10 seats in Parliament compared to 130 for men (INSTAT, 2023). By 2009, after gender quotas were implemented for the first time, the number of women MPs increased to 23, while men MPs declined to 117, reducing the gap to 94 seats (Albanian Parliament, 2025). In 2025, women's representation rose significantly to 49 seats, and men's representation decreased further to about 91 seats, narrowing the gender gap to 42 seats (Balkanweb, 2025). Nonetheless, greater numerical inclusion does not automatically ensure substantive influence. In the Albanian context, interview data suggest that women MPs still face barriers in shaping legislative priorities. The effectiveness of quotas often depends on supporting structures, such as party commitment to gender equality, access to leadership positions, mentorship networks, and institutional reforms (Mechkova & Carlitz, 2021; Vukomanović, 2021).

Women's political engagement in Albania has evolved under changing legal frameworks and societal expectations, but challenges remain. However, party ideology influences the kind of representation women can offer. In a political climate where anti-gender rhetoric is gaining power, especially in post-communist settings, women MPs may find themselves constrained in advocating for gender-related policies (Zvada, 2022; Bogaards & Petó, 2022). Structural hierarchies within parliamentary institutions also reinforce inequality. Erikson and Verge (2022) argue that "unequal parliamentary workplace yields multiple inequalities in the representative process". Furthermore, it is important to examine how political parties, women's networks, and international actors contribute to advancing gender-equal policymaking (McCann & Sawyer, 2019; Restrepo Sanín, 2022). Finally, achieving gender equality in political life requires more than meeting numeric thresholds. As Jenkins and Ward (2023) observe, rethinking political history through a gender lens requires more than adding women's stories: it calls for a fundamental re-examination of how power and legitimacy.

1.3 Party dynamics and cultural perceptions

Active participation by women in electoral and legislative processes is essential to strengthen democracy and ensure that political agendas reflect the diverse needs of citizens. However, the ability of MPs - both women and men - to represent their constituencies is shaped by structural inequalities, including region, class, religion, sexuality, race, and ethnicity (Paxton et al., 2010; Sundström et al., 2017). Kunovich and Paxton (2005) note, candidates' selection by party elites remains critical to national representation. The party and electoral systems also play a critical role in shaping access to power. As Bayes (2012) argues, party leadership and nomination processes significantly impact whether women can convert electoral opportunities into meaningful legislative authority.

In Albania's centralized party system, party leaders have significant control in candidate placement, often determining whether women are positioned in "safe" or symbolic (unwinnable) spots on electoral lists. In the absence of strong party commitment to promoting women's leadership, quotas may serve more as symbolic gestures than tools for real change, particularly when women are placed in unwinnable list positions. Höhmann & Nugent (2022) argue that male MPs often advocate for women's interests to win elections and MPs who are electorally secure face little voter pressure to engage in substantive representation. Similarly, Kroeber (2023) finds that men are unlikely to advance women's interests in a meaningful way, even when women have a large number within their party's parliamentary group.

However, it remains challenging to separate the impact of women's representation from the limitations imposed by party loyalty. Even when women gain access to political office, expectations of loyalty to party lines often prevent individual advocacy. Paxton et al. (2007) note that voters tend to expect women MPs to follow party agendas, regardless of whether those agendas align with gender equality. Similarly, Anderson-Nilsson and Clayton (2021) find that in electoral processes, women candidates may be constrained by expectations to prioritize party cohesion over individual advocacy. For instance, Maldrita Bardho, a Socialist Party candidate in the 2025 elections, who won a seat by 10 votes but resigned in favour of her colleague Zeniqe Çausi, citing she "*probably fought more for the team than for herself in this campaign.*" (Top Channel, 2025).

Cultural norms also shape political engagement and ambition. Many women feel discouraged from seeking leadership positions because political culture is perceived as incompatible with feminine norms (Fraile & Marinova, 2024). Also, Jiang and Chen (2024) point to authoritarian contexts where women are often portrayed as apolitical or indifferent to public life, further marginalizing their political presence. Public perceptions of leadership are also shaped by media coverage. According to European Commission data (2024) show that almost half of the population in the world believes that men are better suited for political leadership than women. In Albania, such attitudes are mirrored in media behaviour during electoral campaigns. Women candidates received significantly less media coverage than their male counterparts and political parties often avoided sending women to televised debates, based on assumptions that they lacked the rhetorical aggression considered necessary for public political engagement (UN Women Albania, 2021).

2. Methodology

This paper examines how Albanian MPs engage in legislative debates within two key parliamentary committees - Economy and Finance, and Labour, Social Issues and Health - focusing on gendered experiences. Using semi-structured interviews, it captures internal dynamics that would otherwise remain inaccessible (Bundi et al., 2018; Vis & Stolwijk, 2021). Pre-formulated questions helped keep the discussion aligned with research goals (Bailer, 2014; Berthet et al., 2023), which was crucial given MPs' tendency for lengthy responses (Dalton, 2011). MPs were identified from the list of all MPs serving in the two committees from the official website of the Albanian Parliament in January 2025. The MPs represented different political parties and professional backgrounds. An invitation to participate in an interview was sent by email to a total of 48 MPs part of these two Committees. The invitation described the research objectives, explained the voluntary nature of participation, and assured respondents that their identities and responses would remain confidential. Despite initial confirmations, coordinating the interviews posed logistical challenges. Considering that MPs are not always supporters of researchers (Cowley, 2022), follow-up reminders were frequently necessary, and in several cases, long waits were required before interviews could begin.

Table 1. Demographic and professional profiles of the Members of Parliament (MPs) interviewed

Category	Value
Number of Women MPs	7
Number of Men MPs	6
Average Terms (Women)	1.71
Average Terms (Men)	4
Political Party - PS	8
Political Party – Opposition Parties	5
Average Age (Women)	48.43
Average Age (Men)	60.17

Of all the MPs contacted, 14 agreed to participate. However, due to scheduling conflicts, one interview could not be completed, resulting in 13 interviews conducted in total. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic and professional profiles of the thirteen Members of Parliament (MPs) who were interviewed. Of the thirteen MPs interviewed, seven were women and six were men. The average number of terms served by women was 1.71, while men had an average of 4 terms. Regarding political affiliation, 8 MPs belonged to the Socialist Party (PS), and 5 were members of opposition parties. Because the opposition parties are much smaller in number, there is the potential to identify the individual MPs who gave the interview. For this reason, the data include only two-party categories: the Socialist Party and the parties in

opposition. The average age of women MPs interviewed was 48.43 years, and the average age of men MPs interviewed was 60.17 years. Each interview was conducted in person between January and February 2025. The interview questions were grouped into three principal areas: (1) the nature of discussions that take place in the selected committees, (2) MPs' experiences to influence legislation and policy, and (3) perceptions of how the increased number of women MPs has affected committee debates. All interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent, transcribed, and anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Interviews were transcribed and thematically coded. Analysis focused on patterns in MPs' accounts of committee work and the influence of gender quotas on policy discussions.

3. Findings

The findings reveal that while both men and women MPs in Albania engage actively in debates on economic, fiscal, healthcare, and social welfare policies, their perspectives and emphases differ in notable ways. Men MPs tended to frame economic and health issues in technical and procedural aspects, whereas women MPs connected these policies to social consequences. Views on gender quotas also differed: women MPs largely endorsed quotas as transformative for inclusion and debate, while men MP were more skeptical, questioning whether quotas improved merit or political culture.

3.1 Topics raised by Members of Parliament

3.1.1 Economic and fiscal policy debates

Discussions of economic and fiscal policy emerged as a central focus for MPs from both committees, but the ways in which men and women MPs framed these issues and the sensitivities they emphasized differed. Among men MPs, economic debates were presented primarily in technical and procedural terms. One man MP who had served as rapporteur of the state budget emphasized the challenges of sustaining pensions over the long term.

Figure 2. Economic and fiscal policy debates by gender



Similarly, another man MP described pension sustainability as a critical problem, observing inefficiencies in public administration as a barrier to effective economic management: “We are dealing with inefficiencies in the public administration; it is not professional or effective enough yet.” While men MPs acknowledged fiscal sustainability, they were less likely to connect budget measures to gendered caregiving responsibilities. In contrast, women MPs also highlighted budget and fiscal debates but frequently connected them to social dimensions, particularly gender budgeting and the impact on women’s welfare. One woman MP explained that “since 2016, the share of gender budgeting has increased from 1% to 9%, thanks to changes in the Organic Budget Law,” She further added: “The goal is for women, especially heads of

households, to have access to finance.” Another woman MP recounted the importance of pensions and social protection policies, stating: “Pension issues have become a top concern in the last two years,” and noting that pensions often emerged in community consultations as a priority. Women MPs also described how fiscal policies intersect with caregiving such as the role of subsidies for mothers with multiple children.

3.1.2 Healthcare and social welfare policy

Healthcare was another dominant area of legislative concern, with MPs from the Committee on Health, Labour, and Social Affairs repeatedly describing both structural shortcomings and reform efforts. For men MPs, the main preoccupations centered on the functionality of the health insurance system and the bureaucratic obstacles facing patients with chronic conditions.

Figure 3. Healthcare and social welfare policies by gender



One man MP stated: “The health insurance system is dysfunctional; many people remain uninsured while still receiving services.” Another man MP elaborated on the administrative burden for people with lifelong illnesses: “Persons suffering from autism, schizophrenia, or malignant diseases should not be re-evaluated every year — these are lifelong conditions.” Men MPs were particularly focused on shortages in the health workforce and the need to modernize medical education. One man MP observed that “we are facing a shortage of family doctors; reforming the training and recruitment is essential.” Their narratives highlighted systemic and technical aspects of health reform, emphasizing efficiency, staffing, and budget management. Women MPs also raised structural issues but often framed them in terms of vulnerable groups and the social responsibilities of the state. One woman MP recalled the legislative efforts around professional training and inclusion: “Issues pertaining to persons with disabilities, issues pertaining to employment and vocational education, pensions...” Women MPs emphasized the importance of targeted support for specific groups, such as paraplegic and tetraplegic individuals, children with autism spectrum disorders, and families caring for children with mental health issues. One woman MP stressed: “We’re working on recognizing caretaking for autistic children as pensionable years.” Another woman MP underlined the importance of parenting support. Women MPs frequently described healthcare debates as linked with social protections.

3.2 Institutional constraints and legislative processes

MPs described the structural limitations that shape Albanian parliamentary work. Both men and women underscored the dominance of the executive in legislative drafting and the lack of

capacity to initiate independent proposals. As one of the men MPs put it plainly: “It is logical that most proposals come from the government because it governs daily and develops the strategies.” Another man MP highlighted the lack of technical resources: “MPs have no assistants. We feel the lack of technical assistance to prepare quality legal proposals.” Similarly, women MPs described the same constraints, emphasizing the difficulty of sustaining legislative initiatives without advisory support. One woman MP explained: “The MP works individually on each draft law... advisors and assistants have been removed.” Another elaborated: “Every proposal by a deputy passes through the Council of Ministers for opinion taking... if there are no conflicts, it enters as an initiative.” While both men and women criticized these structural challenges, women MPs often linked procedural limitations to broader concerns about social responsiveness and democratic legitimacy. For example, one woman MP shared that: “We are spending most of our time solving citizens’ everyday issues due to inefficiencies in public services.” Whereas one man MP shared: “There is a strict camp division, majority versus opposition that limits individual initiatives and constructive negotiations.” Men MPs were more likely to present these constraints as professional frustrations, with less focus on their implications for marginalized communities. A further procedural tension that emerged among men MPs was the role of party polarization.

3.3 Perspectives on gender quotas and representation

Views on gender quotas varied widely between men and women MPs. Most women interviewed expressed support for quotas, describing them as transformative for both numerical inclusion and qualitative improvements in debate. One woman MP stated: “The quota... has also brought qualitatively more women’s voices... in decision-making bodies.” Several women noted that quotas had enabled new agendas to enter parliamentary discussions, especially on social issues.

Table 2. Perspectives of women and men MPs on gender quotas and political culture

Perspectives	Women MPs	Men MPs
Support for women’s political participation	“The quota... has also brought qualitatively more women’s voices... in decision-making bodies.”	“There are women who entered politics and performed even better than men.”
	“The presence of women has made the Assembly more open to people... more sensitive to social issues.”	
	“Participation of women makes politics softer, as their presence reduces aggression in committees.”	
Critical views	“I don’t see that the increased number of women has influenced politics... often women adopt a more ‘masculine’ tone once they gain power.”	“Entering politics requires preparation, personal conviction, and sacrifice. If you’re not mentally prepared for this life, your contribution will be superficial.”
		“It is simply a formal representation... it has fulfilled a hypocritical criterion.”

Perspectives	Women MPs	Men MPs
	<p>“There is apathy, even among women MPs, when it comes to discussing gender issues.”</p> <p>“Even when women raise issues about women, they are seen as secondary... not a priority.”</p> <p>“As long as women attack other women, we won’t advance gender equality. That’s the biggest hypocrisy.”</p>	<p>“I am against quotas. Parliament should consist of those who deserve to be there, not because of their gender.”</p> <p>“...structural and partisan norms ultimately shape everyone’s behaviour, regardless of gender”.</p>
Views on gender political behavior	<p>“Participation of women makes politics softer, as their presence reduces aggression in committees.”</p> <p>“I haven’t seen any woman burn chairs, set Parliament on fire or pull-out microphones. I don’t know where the aggression is.”</p>	<p>“The world is divided between capable and incapable people. It is not about being man or woman.”</p> <p>“Instead of softening politics, some women have become flag bearers for the same harsh positions traditionally held by men.”</p> <p>“To be honest, today the majority are women and girls who, beyond expectations that would reduce that political aggressiveness, have increased it.”</p>

One women MP said: “The presence of women has made the Assembly more open to people... more sensitive to social issues.” In contrast, men MPs expressed more ambivalence or scepticisms. One man MP argued: “I am against quotas. Parliament should consist of those who deserve to be there, not because of their gender.” Another man MP said: “The world is divided between capable and incapable people. It is not about being men or women.” Some men MPs believed that quotas did little to improve the substance of politics, with one remarking: “Instead of softening politics, some women have become flag bearers for the same harsh positions traditionally held by men.” Even among supportive men MPs, doubts persisted about whether increased women’s presence had transformed the culture of debate or policy. One reflected: “Entering politics requires preparation, personal conviction, and sacrifice. If you’re not mentally prepared for this life, your contribution will be superficial.” This scepticism underscores how gender quotas, while accepted as a mechanism for empowering women in politics, remain contested in their perceived ability to promote equality. One woman MP described: “I don’t see that the increased number of women has influenced politics... often women adopt a more ‘masculine’ tone once they gain power.” Another woman MP shared that: “There is apathy, even among women MPs, when it comes to discussing gender issues.” Some women MPs also expressed caution, noting that the presence of women alone does not guarantee progress unless supportive mechanisms are in place, for example, cross-party collaboration, mentorship opportunities, or institutional support for gender-sensitive policymaking.

3.4 Gendered perceptions of political culture

One of the contrasts between men's and women's accounts concerned perceptions of political behaviour and culture. Women MPs frequently described politics as a space where gender influenced tone and priorities. One woman observed: "Participation of women makes politics softer, as their presence reduces aggression in committees." Another noted: "I haven't seen any woman burn chairs, set Parliament on fire or pull-out microphones. I don't know where the aggression is." By contrast, men MPs often perceived women as increasingly adopting oppositional tactics traditionally associated with men. One described this as evidence that "...structural and partisan norms ultimately shape everyone's behaviour, regardless of gender". Women MPs also raised concerns about internalized patriarchal norms. One stated: "As long as women attack other women, we won't advance gender equality. That's the biggest hypocrisy." Another highlighted persistent biases: "Even when women raise issues about women, they are seen as secondary... not a priority." While gender quotas have transformed the composition of Parliament, cultural change remains uneven. Women MPs must navigate contradictory expectations. They must be assertive without being seen as aggressive and supportive of other women without appearing partial.

3.5 Challenges of public expectations and constituency work

Both men and women MPs reported that much of their work involved negotiating citizen criticisms and compensating for public administration shortcomings. Across the interviews, it became clear that the burden of responding to individual complaints occupies a significant portion of MPs' time, often more than substantive legislative drafting. However, women MP more often linked this to systemic failures that disproportionately impact disadvantaged groups. Women's narratives frequently framed constituency work as part of a broader mission to make politics more inclusive and responsive. One woman MP observed: "We are spending most of our time solving citizens' everyday issues due to inefficiencies in public services." Another pointed out that many of the problems brought to MPs' offices reflect deep inequities in how resources are allocated and how services are delivered across urban and rural areas. She observed that "citizens in remote areas feel abandoned, and they come to us because they have nowhere else to go." One woman MP described her engagement with local communities as an extension of her role as a legislator: "You can't separate legislation from people's real problems. If you listen, you understand what policies are needed." Another emphasized the importance of maintaining a visible presence in her district: "Especially for women MPs, being accessible shows that politics is not distant or hostile". Some men MPs acknowledged similar pressures but described them more neutrally as part of the workload. One explained that "citizens expect you to resolve their issues directly," while another remarked that this constant flow of requests "makes it very hard to focus on drafting comprehensive reforms." The emphasis in their accounts was often on the procedural difficulty of handling volume and complexity, rather than the social consequences.

4. Conclusion

The findings reveal that while women and men MPs are both active participants in debates on economic, healthcare, and social welfare policies, their perspectives and priorities often differ. Men MPs tend to focus on technical, procedural, and systemic aspects of

legislation. They frame policy challenges around reform and budget management. In contrast, MPs place greater emphasis on the social impact of policies and advocate for gender-responsive budgeting. This suggests a gendered lens in policy engagement, though further research is needed to clarify how gender considerations are integrated into budgetary processes (Joshi et al., 2025). Höhmann (2020) observed that electoral incentive influences women MPs' focus on women's interests, a pattern reflected in the findings of this article, where women MPs often described their work connected to local community.

While Albania has made progress in diversifying representation since 1945 the first time that a woman could vote and be elected, significant challenges persist even after the implementation of the gender quota in 2009. Gendered expectations, institutional constraints, and cultural resistance still limit the extent to which women MPs can exercise influence and transform parliamentary practices. The findings highlight persistent structural and cultural barriers that shape parliamentary work. While most women MPs emphasized that the gender quota had been essential for their entry into Parliament and for expanding the range of issues considered legitimate for debate, several also expressed caution about the limits of such mechanisms. This dual perspective reflects Dahlerup & Freidenvall (2010) idea of the "glass ceiling," where critics argue quotas can limit women's representation to the quota minimum. Skepticisms among male MPs about the value of quotas also remains a barrier. Several men MP questioned whether quotas improve merit or the substance of parliamentary debate, viewing them as formal mechanisms rather than meaningful tools for change.

The findings have several implications for institutional reform. *First*, increasing the number and capacity of technical support staff within parliamentary committees would significantly improve MPs' ability to contribute meaningfully to legislative processes. This is particularly vital for newer or less experienced MPs, many of whom are women, and who often lack the institutional knowledge and resources to draft policy proposals or respond effectively to government initiatives. *Second*, gender-sensitive practices should be systematically mainstreamed across all parliamentary committees, not just those dealing with social issues. This shift would challenge the perception that gender equality is a central to social policies, rather than a cross-cutting issue. *Third*, political parties should be encouraged to go beyond formal compliance with gender quotas and foster mentorship networks that strengthen women's leadership in local and national level. Party commitment to gender equality should be evaluated not only by the number of women on candidate lists, but by the opportunities those women have in party platforms, leadership roles, and influence decision-making. These steps are crucial to support women's political participation, strengthen institutional capacity, and challenge norms that restrict meaningful representation.

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