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WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? ENHANCING WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN THE LOCAL COUNCILS OF ALBANIA

ABSTRACT Women's representation in the local councils of Albania has increased almost fourfold in less than a decade. But – in the face of these numeric changes – there are growing concerns that numbers do not translate into political power and are used strategically by political leaders. We draw upon our experience of studying women's political representation in local councils – and our engagement with national and international organizations – to discuss what we think should be the next steps for advancing women's political representation in local councils. Our suggestions are useful for women's rights advocates in Albania and other countries in the region facing similar development challenges.

Keywords: local councils, political representation, gender quotas, local development, Albania

INTRODUCTION

Women hold 44% of the seats in the local councils of Albania – an almost fourfold increase in less than a decade (UN Women 2023a). The increased presence of women in local politics has earned Albania a reputation for being one of the European countries with the highest proportion of women in local councils (Council of European Municipalities and Regions 2019). Yet, there is a growing concern that numbers do not translate

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into political power (Dauti 2020). Another interrelated concern is that an increasingly authoritarian leadership uses women's numeric representation to sustain political power (Erebara 2020). Even though these concerns persist, they have rarely been the subject of public discussions. We consider this a critical moment for women's political representation in local councils and, more broadly, women's political representation in the country. As women's numbers in local councils have reached the highest level since the fall of communism, how do we advance – beyond numbers – women's political representation?

In the present article, we draw upon our experience of studying women's political representation in the local councils of Albania – and our engagement with civil society organizations and international organizations – to discuss what we think should be the next steps for the advancement of women's political representation in local councils. The article makes several contributions. While there is an increasing global concern that authoritarian leaders use women's numbers in politics to advance their political agenda (Bush and Zetterberg 2023; Bjarnegård and Donno 2023; Arat 2022; Bush and Zetterberg 2021; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022), there is little discussion of how local, national, and international actors should respond. The case study of Albania offers insights into countries with significant presence of international organizations that support the advancement of women's rights.

Further, based on our research in local councils and the work of organizations that support women's representation in local politics, we emphasize how women seek to make a difference in local councils. Most studies on women's political representation focus on national parliaments, overlooking elected representatives at the local level (Dauti 2021). The present article highlights the importance of examining women's political representation in local councils, where important decisions concerning social welfare, public services, education, and investments are made. We offer a historical overview of women's political representation in local councils, and – drawing upon our research and policy experience – we discuss lessons for local, national, and international actors.

GENDER EQUALITY REFORMS AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Globally, 36% of locally-elected political representatives are women – a substantial improvement in the last two decades (UN Women 2023b). Implementing electoral gender quotas has been instrumental to the rise of women's numbers in politics (Dahlerup 2018). Early work – following the implementation of electoral gender quotas – focused on the resistance to the reform and how resistance shaped the reform's outcomes (Antić Gaber and Lokar 2006; Dahlerup and Antić Gaber 2017; Krook 2015). Further, scholars have looked into the characteristics of elected representatives – often comparing women with men (Dauti 2020; O'Brien 2012; Murray 2010; Sater 2012). A consistent finding is that gender quotas – contrary to popular belief – do not promote women who are less qualified than men. Other research focuses on substantive representation – examining policy initiatives proposed or voted on by women or women in comparison to men (Beaman et al. 2010; Bratton and Ray 2002; Clayton, Josefsson, and Wang 2016; Schwindt-Bayer 2006; Yildirim 2021). While results vary by context, they reveal that women tend to support social welfare, health, and education policies. More recent work underscores that autocratic leaders use gender equality reforms in politics strategically to appear democratic and to sustain political power – posing the question of whether the implementation of gender quotas in authoritarian regimes advances (or undermines) democratization (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022; Bush and Zetterberg 2021; Donno, Fox, and Kaasik 2022; Valdini 2019). Yet, most of what we know about women's political representation is mainly based on studies conducted with national-level representatives. Even though women's political representation in local assemblies is higher than in parliaments (Berevoescu and Ballington 2021), we know little about the impact of gender equality reforms at the local level. This is especially the case for Southeast European countries. We have observed that most studies focus on national-level representatives, and questions of impact are rarely explored (see Korunovska et al. 2015 for an exception). The present article builds upon our knowledge of gender equality reforms and women's political representation in Albania to offer suggestions for advancing women's political representation in local councils.

METHODOLOGY

The present article draws on our research and policy experience in Albania. Since 2014, we have conducted four research projects on women's political representation; the fifth project is underway. Using a variety of methods – such as surveys, focus groups, in-depth interviews, and observation of council meetings – we have looked into aspects such as women's decision-making power in local councils, the implementation of gender quotas in local councils, and gender and political violence (see, e.g., Dauti 2018, 2022; Dauti and Metaj 2017). We have used research findings to raise public awareness and contest policy proposals undermining women's political representation. One of us (Metaj) served in one of the largest women's rights organizations in Albania in the past, bringing her into close contact with policy actors and women's rights advocates across the country. We have also served as consultants for development agencies that promote women's rights – an experience that has informed our understanding of the role of the international community in advancing gender equality reforms in the country. The article reflects on the experience of studying women's political representation in local councils and advocating for women's participation in politics.

WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN THE LOCAL COUNCILS OF ALBANIA

A decade ago, 24% of local councils in Albania (91 out of 384 local councils) had no women. In stark contrast to the communist past, women held only 12% of local council seats (Dauti and Gjermeni 2015). During communism, women constituted around 30% of deputies in the People's Assembly and 40% of the leaders of mass organizations (Biberaj 1990). However, the numeric achievements were not sustained after the fall of communism. Women's representation in Albanian politics declined dramatically – reaching similar levels to 1945 (Instat 2018) – a pattern observed in other countries in the region (see, e.g., Rashkova and Zankina 2020; Šinko 2023; Čičkarić 2023).

Turning the tide – increasing women's numbers in politics – became inextricable from Albania's democratization reforms. In collaboration with

civil society organizations and women's rights advocates, the international community pushed for gender quotas in politics. Two important legal reforms were the introduction of gender quotas for "the underrepresented gender" in the Electoral Code (2008) and the enactment of the Gender Equality in Society Law (2008). The Electoral Code established that "for the elections of local government bodies, one in every three names on the list must belong to each gender" (Article 67). Failure to comply with this rule would result in a fine of approximately 300 USD (Articles 67 and 175). A tactic used by political actors was adding women's names to the list – "to have the number right" – and surpassing the number of mandates. The Central Election Commission accepted such lists because they satisfied the gender requirement (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights 2009). Resistance continued to be strong in the local elections of 2011. Among the 6,807 candidate lists – submitted to the Central Election Commission by 54 political parties – 2,086 lists (30.64%) violated the gender quota requirement. Only one political party was fined for non-compliance (Central Election Commission 2011).

Women's representation in local councils – following the local elections of 2011 – remained low. Women held 12% of council seats, marking a mere two-percentage-point increase from the local elections in 2007 (Dauti and Gjermeni 2015). The introduction of gender quotas faced backlash. Political actors acted strategically to impede successful implementation, employing strategies such as placing women at the bottom of party lists, recruiting women through family or kinship ties, or replacing women with men after elections (Krasniqi 2017; Dauti 2018).

Women's rights advocates responded to the poor implementation of gender quotas and introduced stronger sanctions for non-compliance. In the event of a mandate interruption, the Central Election Commission was responsible for transferring the mandate to the next candidate of the same gender on the list (Article 164). However, a golden moment emerged in 2015 after the Socialist Party came to power. Armed with compelling arguments that called for the advancement of human rights and EU accession, the Alliance of Women Deputies – an interparty alliance established to represent the interests of women parliamentarians – pushed for amendments to the Electoral Code. Women parliamentarians proposed, among others, increasing the quota threshold,

changing the position of women in party candidate lists – from “one in every three names” to “one in every two consecutive names” – increasing sanctions for non-compliance, and prohibiting the replacement of women with men. While the proposals of the Alliance of Women Parliamentarians were made for both levels of the government – national and local – resistance was higher for national-level politics. Referring to the minutes of the Commission for Legal Issues, Public Administration, and Human Rights (2015), members of the Parliament characterized the increase of the quota threshold – from 30% to 50% – as more costly for the Parliament than local councils. Quota proponents – mainly women – discussed the importance of having more women in politics. Their arguments – as the following examples demonstrate – were built on the expectation that the increased presence of women in politics would improve the quality of representation.

“Do you want to decriminalize it [politics]? Make the parliament 50% women and 50% men! I repeat: Make the parliament 50% women and 50% men!” (Vasilika Hysi, Socialist Party).

“It is better [to have] quotas for women, and quotas and women in parliament than quotas for crime in this parliament” (Majlinda Bregu, Democratic Party).

“More women in politics today means less space for incriminated persons tomorrow” (Gerti Bogdani, Democratic Party). (Commission for Legal Issues, Public Administration, and Human Rights 2015, 77, 80, 88)

Meanwhile, parliamentarians who opposed gender quotas – a smaller number – characterized quotas as a tool that advances the interests of political leadership and deepens autocratization. Below, we introduce the main opposition by a representative of the Republican Party:

“We have an electoral system controlled by the political leadership of those who today are playing the game like they want women in parliament. ... [With the implementation of gender quotas] The Albanian state does not do anything else but turns to an autocratic state, where one individual controls the majority, and of course the same thing happens on the other side, the opposition” (Fatmir Mediu, Republican Party). (Commission for Legal Issues, Public Administration, and Human Rights 2015, 94, 95)

The implementation of gender quotas in the local elections of 2015 had a strong, positive impact on women's numbers in local councils. Women's percentage in local councils increased almost threefold – from 12% to 35%. A study we conducted following the local elections of 2015 revealed that the majority of women who joined local councils were newcomers. Quota-elected women – compared to their non-quota counterparts – were younger, had less political experience, and were more likely to live in rural areas (Dauti and Metaj 2017).

Despite the changes that were made to the Electoral Code, violations of the quota threshold continued. In the local elections in 2015, the Central Election Commission identified 123 violations of the quota threshold. Violations spread across 39 political parties and 28 municipalities (out of 61 in the country) (Central Election Commission 2016). The Central Election Commission, however, did not take any measures. Men led the majority of party lists. Out of 2,046 party candidate lists submitted to the Central Election Commission in 2015, only 215 (10.51%) were headed by a woman (Central Election Commission 2015). Additional changes were made to the Electoral Code in 2020, including the provision of a definition for the underrepresented gender (Article 1) and an article about elections and gender equality (Article 4). Women's proportion in local councils continued to increase in subsequent election cycles. Before the local elections of 2023, women held 44% of local council seats (UN Women 2023a). The Central Election Commission has not published the new results yet (as of October 28, 2023). Table 1 summarizes the legal changes that occurred between 2008 and 2020 and the corresponding changes in women's numeric representation in local councils. The table provides the percentage of women – out of all candidates – who ran for office and the percentage of women – out of all councilors – who were elected.

Skepticism regarding women's representation in local politics – following the implementation of gender quotas in 2015 – abounded. An argument – that still persists – is that women's role during council meetings is limited to promoting the party's agenda (Erebara 2015). Questions were also raised about women's ability to hold leadership positions. Our research in local councils in 2016 and 2018 revealed that this skepticism is unfounded. While women were more likely than men to report that they relied on personal ties

Year	Legal changes	Numeric representation
2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “One in every three names on the list must belong to each gender” (Article 67). • Fine for non-compliance (Articles 67 and 175). 	30.24% (candidates) 12.33% (elected councilors) <i>Local elections of 2011</i>
2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “In each electoral district, at least thirty percent of the multi-name list and one of the first three names of the multi-name list must belong to each gender” (Article 67). • A vacancy arising from an interrupted mandate is filled by a candidate of the same gender (Article 164). • In cases of non-compliance, vacancies are filled by candidates of the underrepresented gender, until the gender quota is reached (Article 175). 	<i>Local elections held in 2015</i> (see below)
2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “For each municipal council, one in every two consecutive names in ranking shall belong to the same gender” (Article 67). • Removal of fines for non-compliance and rejection of non-compliant party candidate lists (Article 175). 	49.36% (candidates) 34.80% (elected councilors) <i>Local elections of 2015</i> 49.02% (candidates) 43.61% (elected councilors) <i>Local elections of 2019</i>
2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A definition provided for the underrepresented gender (Article 1). • A specific article about elections and gender equality (Article 4). 	Results not available yet <i>Local elections of 2023</i>

Table 1. Changes to the Electoral Code and Women’s Representation in Local Councils over Time

to join local councils, they made significant contributions during council meetings. We found that women’s contribution – compared to men – was more pronounced in the policy areas of education and social welfare (Dauti 2021). Further, women were more likely than men to demand transparency (Dauti 2023). Quota-elected women – contrary to popular belief – were more educated than men (Dauti and Metaj 2017). While it is open to question whether these findings still hold, they demonstrate the importance of evidence in challenging popular beliefs. Other important work sheds light on the initiatives that Women’s Alliances – which bring together elected women, despite their party affiliation – have undertaken in local councils. A review of the initiatives undertaken by Women’s Alliances in 16 municipalities across the country revealed that initiatives have focused on women entrepreneurs, poor women, rural women, victims of domestic violence,

persons with disabilities, and women-headed households (Strong Municipalities 2019).

We have observed that resistance to gender quotas has somehow weakened; however, political actors have not given up acting strategically. A strategy that emerged in 2015 was for men candidates – affiliated with big parties – to join small parties. Being left out of party candidate lists – due to their replacement with women – some men candidates joined small parties and were placed at the top of the candidate list. The result of this strategy was that small parties – which tend to have a single representative in local councils – were mainly represented by men. Based on the stories we have heard in the field, this pattern persists, especially in areas where women have historically been excluded from politics.

The sustainability of gender quotas in politics was put to the test in 2020 when the Political Council – a political body established to revise the Electoral Code – proposed to change the quota threshold in local councils from 50% to 30% (Vata 2020). We joined forces with the Women’s Network Equality in Decision-Making – a civil society organization that promotes women’s rights in Albania – and responded to the proposal. Fortunately, the quota threshold did not change. The Working Group on Gender Equality in Decision-Making – comprised of national and international organizations – proposed a quota threshold of 50% for both levels of the government. The proposal was not accepted.

The concern raised in other contexts that autocratic leaders have recognized the gains of having more women in politics, and they are using women’s numbers strategically (see, e.g., Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022; Thames and Bloom 2023; Bush and Zetterberg 2023; Bjarnegård and Donno 2023; Comstock and Vilán 2023; Tripp 2023; Arat 2022; Donno, Fox, and Kaasik 2022; Bush and Zetterberg 2021; Valdini 2019) is also present in Albania. The Prime Minister opposed open party candidate lists – a proposal that was expected to increase within-party competition and reverse democratic decline – on the grounds that open lists would undermine the representation of women. In 2020, during a session of the Albanian Parliament, the Prime Minister characterized women and men in politics as two teams where women players “have their feet tied” (Albanian Parliament 2020, 30), and he asserted that open lists would reinforce the gender gap. The opposi-

tion responded – highlighting that “women are used to maintaining closed lists” (Albanian Parliament 2020, 38). Women’s representation in Albanian politics is fraught with problems. Using storytelling to study violence against women in politics, we learned that women politicians viewed their party as the main source of political violence. Young women, in particular, shared that party leaders appear highly supportive of women in public, but they threaten women behind the scenes (Dauti and Metaj 2021).

While women’s numbers in Albanian politics have improved, the country’s political regime has become increasingly repressive. The government has increased attacks on civil society and the media in the last few years. Indicators of transparency and freedom of speech have worsened (Korçari 2021; Freedom House 2021; Bogdani 2022; Erebara 2023). According to the Freedom House, Albania’s freedom score declined from 68 in 2018 to 66 in 2021 (Freedom House 2018, 2020). While women hold key positions in the government, have important portfolios, and are visible in the media, they are being associated with a government that is becoming increasingly repressive. Recent data show that skepticism about women’s representation in local councils – and, more broadly, politics – is on the rise. In 2022, the percentage of Albanians who reported that the increased presence of women in local councils will positively impact local governance was lower than in 2016 (58% vs. 65%). Similarly, Albanians were less likely to report that women and men are equally capable of holding public office in 2022 than in 2016 (78% vs. 83%) (Semini, Kuçi, and Dauti 2023). A growing concern among academics is the backlash against research projects that produce “undesirable” results (Dauti, Bejko, and Rama 2023).

Formally speaking, the government of Albania has expressed its commitment to gender equality reforms by establishing state institutions such as the National Council for Gender Equality, the National Coordinator for Gender Equality, Gender Equality Officers, and Gender Equality Commissions. The primary task of such institutions is to advance women’s rights and to promote gender equality. A close investigation, however, reveals little real commitment to making these institutions work effectively. The National Council for Gender Equality – an advisory body to the government chaired by the Minister of Health and Social Protection – brings together state officials and representatives of civil society organizations to discuss gender

equality policies. Between 2016 and 2020, the council convened only 4 meetings, for which the Supreme State Control could not locate any documented minutes (Supreme State Control 2023, 75, 76). The National Coordinator for Gender Equality – responsible for undertaking initiatives that strengthen gender equality mechanisms, a position held by the Deputy Prime Minister – is criticized for failing to collaborate with the National Council for Gender Equality (Supreme State Control 2023, 77). Gender Equality Officers – employed in ministries and municipalities – share a common concern, which is being responsible for addressing everything that falls under “social issues,” such as violence against women, child abuse, poverty, and poor access to social services (Supreme State Control 2023, 80–83).

Another persistent problem is the overreliance on international organizations for developing and implementing government strategies. The implementation of the National Strategy for Gender Equality (2021–2030), for example, depends to a large extent (33.9%) on donors and “other sources.” The strategy has a 15.6% financial gap (Ministry of Health and Social Protection 2021). Budget data suggests that gender equality is far from a priority for the Ministry of Health and Social Protection. The Supreme Audit Institution revealed that the Sector of Policies and Strategies for Social Inclusion and Gender Equality – the unit responsible for overseeing gender equality in the Ministry of Health and Social Protection – received only 8% of the Ministry’s budget in 2018 (Supreme State Control 2019, 10). Close examination of the National Strategy for Gender Equality (2021–2030) reveals other issues. State measures for improving women’s numeric representation in politics – the primary focus of the strategy regarding women’s political representation – are sparse and expected to occur during the second half of the strategy. The budget allocated for activities concerning women’s political representation is unclear (Ministry of Health and Social Protection 2021). These concerns highlight the importance of looking beyond women’s numbers in politics. Numbers alone can obscure the real commitment of the government to advancing gender equality in politics. Where do we go from here? We turn to this question in the next section.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

In the last section, we discuss what we think should be the next steps in advancing women's political representation in the local councils of Albania. Our suggestions focus on challenging current narratives about women's representation in politics, developing a coordinated response to the barriers that women politicians face, examining barriers to impact, and using findings to inform advocacy campaigns. Other suggestions focus on utilizing innovative methods to understand women's political experiences, conducting longitudinal studies to examine the long-term impact of women's numbers in politics, and using evidence to inform public debates and future gender equality reforms. Proposals draw upon our research experience in local councils, collaborations with civil society organizations, and our roles as consultants for international organizations in the country.

Our first suggestion is to publically expose the appropriation of women's representation in politics and its impact on the quality of government – an action that women's rights advocates should collectively pursue. Currently, the dominant narrative is to criticize – and sometimes to blame – women for being staunch supporters of party leaders. In daily conversations, women politicians are characterized as “puppets” – used to indicate that women lack political agency. We suggest challenging the narrative by shifting attention to where the problem resides – political parties and party leadership – and highlighting women's efforts in local councils. Another narrative – dominant among the party in power – is applauding women's numbers in politics (Marini 2023). To counter this narrative, we suggest focusing on the barriers that women politicians face – highlighting such barriers during public discussions. It is essential to unveil the real commitment of Albania's government to gender equality reforms by discussing the effectiveness of state institutions established to promote gender equality and state budgets for gender equality.

Our second suggestion is to develop a coordinated response to the barriers that women politicians face. Given that the government of Albania tends to be more responsive to international than national or local organizations – a concern raised by development practitioners and women's rights activists in the country (Dauti, Bejko, and Rama 2023) – we suggest that local, national, and international organizations respond in unison. In other words, they

join forces and develop initiatives collectively. International organizations, for example, can focus on issues beyond women's numeric representation (e.g., substantive and symbolic representation) and address them in policy documents and conversations with government officials. While applauding the numeric representation of women in politics, conversations can focus on the barriers that women politicians face. We suggest that civil society organizations take a more proactive role by attending council meetings, monitoring the performance of local councilors, and using monitoring results to inform the public and hold local councilors to account. International organizations can support initiatives that bring together elected representatives and civil society organizations.

Our third suggestion is for researchers to focus on barriers to impact. In other words, researchers investigate women's experiences and the obstacles that women face more closely, and they use findings to inform the advocacy campaigns of civil society organizations. While barriers to access have somehow been elevated – due to the implementation of gender quotas – it is time to focus on what happens in political spaces. Another interrelated suggestion is thoroughly examining and exposing political actors' strategies to undermine women's political representation. These strategies are typically discussed during elections, receiving little attention in between elections.

Studying political behavior is not an easy task. This is particularly true for behaviors that political actors consider socially undesirable or politically costly (Rodríguez-Teruel and Daloz 2018; Bailer 2014; Desmond 2004; Dauti 2022). We suggest that researchers consider innovative methods to study political behavior, engage for a considerable time in the field, and not overlook the broader context (e.g., party control) in which councilors enact representation. One method that we have found particularly effective is storytelling. We have used this method to study violence against women in politics (Dauti and Metaj 2021), and we have found it to be more effective than traditional data collection methods such as questionnaires and interviews. Our last suggestion is to invest more time and resources in longitudinal studies to examine the long-term impact of women's numbers in politics. We cannot emphasize enough the importance of moving beyond descriptive studies and using evidence to inform public debates and future gender equality reforms.

CONCLUSION

Women's numeric representation in the local councils of Albania has improved significantly in the last decade, reaching the highest level since the fall of communism. In the present article, we take stock of historical developments, starting with the introduction of electoral gender quotas in 2008, and offer suggestions for enhancing women's representation in local councils. We discuss, among other things, the importance of challenging current narratives about women's representation in politics, developing a coordinated response to the barriers that women politicians face, utilizing innovative methods to understand women's experiences in politics, and using evidence to inform public debates and future gender equality reforms. While our focus has been on the local councils of Albania, suggestions might be useful for other countries in the region grappling with similar development challenges (see, e.g., Antić Gaber and Selišnik 2023; Šinko 2023; Čičkarić 2023). We are overjoyed that women's representation in local councils has reached important milestones – in Albania and beyond – and we consider this a historical moment. However, it is important that efforts to enhance women's representation in politics persist.

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Kuda idemo odavde? Povećanje političkog predstavljanja žena u lokalnim telima Albanije

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Sažetak: Zastupljenost žena u lokalnim predstavničkim telima u Albaniji povećala se skoro četiri puta za manje od jedne decenije. Ali, zajedno sa ovim promena u brojevima, raste i zabrinutost da se brojevi ne pretvaraju u političku moć, i da ih politički lideri koriste strateški. Oslanjamo se na naše iskustvo proučavanja političkog predstavljanja žena u lokalnim telima i odborima i našeg angažmana sa nacionalnim i međunarodnim organizacijama kako bismo razmotrile moguće sledeće korake za unapređenje političkog predstavljanja žena u lokalnim telima i odborima. Smatramo da su naši predlozi korisni braniteljima/braniteljicama ženskih prava u Albaniji i u drugim zemljama u regionu koje se suočavaju sa sličnim razvojnim izazovima.

Ključne reči: lokalna predstavnička tela, političko predstavljanje, rodne kvote, lokalni razvoj, Albanija