

Why Gender Representation Is a Security Issue: The OSCE's Effectiveness Depends on More Than Geopolitics

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The more security debates are dominated by war, deterrence, and geopolitical competition, the more gender representation tends to be treated as a secondary concern. Yet inclusive representation is a critical source of legitimacy, resilience, and effectiveness for international security institutions. Using the OSCE as a case study, this article argues that gender representation is not separate from security; it is one of the conditions that makes effective security governance possible.

In today's security environment, marked by intensifying geopolitical competition, uneven defence capabilities across Europe, and growing risks of instability with economic and political spillovers, it has become tempting to treat gender equality as a "nice-to-have" while security becomes the "real agenda." This is analytically weak and politically costly.

When institutions come under pressure, legitimacy, trust, and social cohesion become core security resources rather than secondary concerns. The "harder" the security environment becomes, the higher the cost of governance structures that fail to deliver broad-based representation. Gender equality

is part of this equation.

Switzerland's 2026 Chairpersonship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) places particular emphasis on dialogue, trust, democratic resilience, and the organisation's ability to act in a context of geopolitical tension. These priorities highlight a central challenge facing multilateral institutions today: credibility under pressure.

If the OSCE is to function as a platform for dialogue in times of crisis, internal legitimacy becomes part of external effectiveness.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA), as a link between international commitments and national parliamentary practice, provides an instructive test case. Persistent gender imbalances in representation are not only an equality issue. They shape what institutions recognise early on as *risk*, whose *concerns* are considered *credible evidence*, and which *priorities* are translated into *policy*.

If comprehensive security is taken seriously, representation cannot remain a symbolic commitment. Gender equality is therefore not a competing priority to security. It is one of the conditions under which security institutions remain credible and effective.

Inclusion improves stability outcomes

Durable security outcomes depend not only on elite bargains but also on the willingness and ability to broaden the circle of legitimate voices. This includes women, who often articulate "everyday security" risks that fall outside traditional "hard security" negotiations.

Northern Ireland provides an illustrative example. Women activists in the [Northern Ireland Women's Coalition](#) organised to gain access to peace talks and helped [broaden the Good Friday Agreement agenda](#) by anchoring it in issues such as victims' rights, community reconciliation, integrated education, and social inclusion. These provisions contributed to making peace socially sustainable. Women's participation did not replace elite bargaining, but helped address blind spots that affect long-term stability. [Evidence](#) shows that when women participate meaningfully, peace agreements are more likely to last and to be implemented more robustly.

This does not imply that women are inherently more peaceful. It simply shows that inclusionary structures expand the scope of agreements so that they include governance failures and social grievances that otherwise persist beneath the surface. Inclusion functions as a political risk-mitigation mechanism. Agreements that encompass a broader range of security concerns are less likely to break down in case political tensions resurface or extremist actors and rival forces seek to revive and mobilise unresolved grievances.

Post-conflict experiences in Southeast Europe also illustrate how inclusion can serve as trust-building infrastructure. [Early post-war institutions](#) dominated by narrow elites often neglected everyday security concerns such as political intimidation, corruption, media capture, or exclusion, especially where women's participation remained largely symbolic. These gaps feed public

distrust and create opportunities for anti-democratic actors to exploit grievances, eroding political consensus.

OSCE-supported inclusion initiatives linked to the Belgrade–Pristina Dialogue show how representation strengthens resilience even when formal negotiations stagnate. Through programmes such as the [Dialogue Academy for Young Women](#), OSCE missions in Kosovo and Serbia have invested in cross-societal networks that articulate community-level risks, sustain communication channels, and maintain confidence-building mechanisms precisely when political dialogue hardens.

Representation as institutional risk management

International standards reinforce this logic. [CEDAW General Recommendation No. 40](#) frames equal and inclusive representation as a benchmark of democratic governance, emphasising parity not only in *access* but in *influence*. In deteriorating security environments, the erosion of trust, declining participation, and growing polarisation create openings for anti-democratic actors to exploit grievances. The cost of weak representation structures rises precisely when political environments become more volatile.

Comparative and applied work on party politics, gender equality, and institutional design shows that representation is shaped by rules, incentives, and informal norms governing recruitment, resource allocation, and leadership opportunities. Numbers alone do not guarantee influence.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly as a test case and what institutions can actually do

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA) is uniquely positioned to act as a transmission belt between international standards and national parliamentary practice. Yet persistent gender imbalances within delegations and leadership structures limit its credibility and constrain its capacity to anticipate political risks and shape how security challenges are debated across participating States.

While the PA cannot determine who national parliaments send, this does not mean leverage is absent.

Switzerland's Chairpersonship highlights the importance of democratic institutions, human rights, and the OSCE's operational capacity. ODIHR's work provides concrete tools for translating these commitments into institutional practice, such as through the [Gender Parity Roadmap](#), linking formal commitments to accountability mechanisms, gender-sensitive procedures, engagement of male leaders, and monitoring tools within political parties and parliamentary structures. Institutional change is therefore not only normative but procedural.

However, tools alone do not change behaviour. Incentives do.

First, representation can be linked to access to influence. Even without controlling delegation composition, the PA shapes visibility, leadership positions, speaking opportunities, and institutional prestige. When gender balance becomes associated with rapporteur roles, special missions, and

leadership responsibilities, incentives shift through institutional signalling rather than coercion.

Second, party families function as transmission belts for expectations.

Research on party incentives and transnational linkages demonstrates how norms travel through political networks. The Vjosa River protection campaign in Albania illustrates how policy change often results not only from formal conditionality but also from political socialisation across transnational networks. The policy field differs, but the logic of norm diffusion is transferable.

Third, representation cannot advance without addressing structural barriers.

Field research identifies persistent obstacles including unequal access to campaign financing, biased media exposure, harassment, technology-facilitated violence, and entrenched social norms, particularly outside capital centres. The relevant question is therefore not simply how to increase numbers, but under which conditions representation becomes substantive.

Finally, in contexts where gender equality is politically contested, “naming and shaming” often proves ineffective. Status incentives, recognition of incremental progress, and framing reforms as institutional modernisation can reduce political costs and make change domestically viable.

Representation and accountability

The gap between descriptive and substantive representation remains a recurring concern in OSCE/ODIHR discussions, particularly in political environments shaped by patronage and leadership loyalty. When women are criticised for being selected on loyalty grounds, the same scrutiny is rarely applied to men. The issue is not applying stricter standards to women, but avoiding lower expectations that equate representation with conformity. Parity should strengthen accountability to constituencies rather than reinforce dependence on gatekeepers.

Institutional resilience depends on representation

Gender equality does not compete with security priorities. Institutions that integrate inclusive representation are better equipped to detect early warning signals, maintain legitimacy under stress, and withstand political shocks. These are core capacities of resilient security governance.

The strategic question is therefore not whether security institutions can afford to prioritise gender equality. It is whether they can afford the governance risks associated with exclusion, particularly in times of geopolitical pressure.

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Image: [OSCE](#)