

Opening Remarks of Hon. Ms Elke Kahr, Mayor of the City of Graz, Austria.

19 March 2025, 14:00, webinar

"Promoting Women's Rights at the local Level: Political participation of women"

"Exchange on best practices related to promoting inclusive political participation at the local level" with African women local politicians.

Translation Dr Isabella Meier

The fact that women play a key role in political decision-making is a very important element in a democracy. After all, they make up half of the population - and men also benefit when traditional role models are broken up and replaced by more diversity.

Being Mayor of the City of Graz is a special task for me. With Deputy Mayor Judith Schwentner, there is currently a second woman leading the Graz city government.

It has always been important to me to represent the interests of the population in the best way possible and to not forget anyone in the process. The fact that I became mayor with this approach, makes it even more important. We can now implement much of what is necessary in the interests of socially balanced and fair politics. My parents always said: "The prince, who rides along on a white horse only exists in fairy tales." At the same time, they never persuaded me that, as a woman, I would have fewer abilities, rights or opportunities than a man. That brought me to a good start position. For me, it was always about the matter, never about a specific position.

In the meantime, I have realised to my surprise, is that many girls I meet here in the city hall, at events or on the street, for example, do not take it for granted that they are facing a "female mayor". I have noticed that they feel empowered in their self-image as girls or young women and see me as a role model.

The governing coalition in Graz is led by three women: We work very well together with Judith Schwentner from the Green Party as a Deputy Mayor and Daniela Schlüsselberger as head of the Social Democrats. Above all, personal vanities do not get in the way of our co-operation.

My party, the Communist Party Austria (KPÖ), has followed the so-called "zip system" for decades when drawing up the list of mandataries. The 'zip system' is used when drawing up lists of candidates for the elections: thereby, female and male candidates should be represented alternately on the lists of candidates. This ensures that men and women appear in balanced proportions on the lists of candidates and can be elected to the municipal council.

I am also a city councillor for women's affairs in Graz. In this role, it is important to me that the interests of women in Graz are taken just as seriously as those of men. Our departmental funding is used to support important women's organisations in Graz, which provide legal advice for women, safer spaces, promotion of women's health and protection against violence. The Graz Women's Council is an independent organisation that networks and supports the feminist scene in Graz. It promotes gender equality and it is also important to me. The City of Graz covers the costs for the premises and the management of the organisation.

We also provide support and awareness raising on sexual harassment with our campaigns: "Luisa is here!" and "Luisa goes swimming" in restaurants and public swimming pools. Thereby, staff in these facilities is trained to take the question: "Is Luisa here?" as a codeword for being affected by sexual harassment and immediately offering support and help.

Moreover with our "STOP violence" boards in public spaces. Our "FRITZi bringt's" initiative aims at bringing information to places where women spend a lot of time during the summer months (e.g. parks, shopping centres, playgrounds, etc.). With these measures, we try to reach and support women in Graz in the best possible way.

The role of women in a society says a lot about how highly developed the society as a whole is. You have to keep this in mind at all times. Discrimination against women is just one of many forms of discrimination. Discrimination can be based on gender, age, origin, ethnicity, skin colour, sexual orientation, religion or ideology. They all harm everyone, they divide society and threaten peace. We should show the same appreciation to all the people we meet. As mayor, I would like to set a good example in this respect, and we all want to set a good example as the human rights city of Graz.