

● ● **African Cultural
Foundation Publications**

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Reclaiming Space: “Yes She Can” and the Future of Black Women’s Political Participation in Austria

African Cultural Foundation/Organization Vienna

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Summary

The African Cultural Foundation (formerly African Cultural Promotion), founded in 1997, is a leading advocacy organization committed to creating educational, political, and participatory opportunities for people of African descent both in the Diaspora and across the African continent. Our work is grounded in the belief that cultural preservation, civic empowerment, and equitable access to education and employment are essential for building inclusive societies.

Through all our initiatives, we seek to connect research, community action, and cultural identity to challenge structural inequality and amplify African perspectives.

This publication is part of our broader commitment to advancing the political participation of Black and People of Colour (BPoC) women and girls in Europe. It explores the systemic and structural barriers that continue to exclude BPoC women from formal political spaces, while highlighting best practices, community-led initiatives, and policy innovations that are working to change this landscape.

Drawing from events, workshops, and advocacy conducted between 2022 and 2025, as well as a review of European case studies and institutional reforms, this brief underscores the urgent need for intersectional strategies that recognize race, gender, and migration background as central to equitable political representation. Through this work, we aim to strengthen the foundations for inclusive governance and ensure that BPoC women are not only present but influential in shaping the political future of Europe.

Non-governmental Organization publications

**Curtesy of the African Cultural Foundation/
Organization**

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Austria's political institutions have historically lacked diversity, particularly concerning Black and People of Colour (BPoC) women. As of 2024, women constitute approximately 36.1% of the National Council (66 out of 183 members). However, the representation of BPoC women remains minimal. Notably, Mireille Ngosso became the first woman of African descent to hold an elected office in Austria in 2018.

Despite incremental progress, systemic barriers continue to hinder BPoC women's full participation in political decision-making processes. These barriers include limited access to political networks, underrepresentation in party leadership, and societal biases that impact both candidacy and electability.

1.1. COMPARATIVE INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

When examining the representation of women in politics globally, Austria's figures are comparable to several other nations but still highlight areas for improvement, especially concerning BPoC women's participation.

- Germany

Women hold 35.7% of the seats in the Bundestag, ranking Germany 44th globally in female parliamentary representation ([Statistisches Bundesamt](#)). However, there is no official disaggregated data on how many of these women are Black or People of Colour. Anecdotally, Germany has made small but notable strides in BPoC representation. One key figure is Awet Tesfaiyes (Alliance 90/The Greens), who became the first Black woman elected to the Bundestag in 2021. Kassem Taher Saleh and Rasha Nasr, both of immigrant background, also represent more racial and ethnic diversity in German politics. Still, BPoC women remain vastly underrepresented. In response, civil society initiatives such as Each One Teach One (EOTO) and Girls' Parliament have focused on increasing political education and empowerment for young women of African descent.

- France

As of the most recent legislative session, 36.2% of seats in the French National Assembly are held by women—a slight decline from previous years ([Le Monde](#)). France does not publicly report statistics on how many of these women are BPoC, but visible figures include Danièle Obono, a Black woman and MP with La France Insoumise, and Hapsatou Sy, a media personality and political figure. While France has long had a diverse population, structural racism, and a strict interpretation of secularism (*laïcité*) have limited the political visibility of racialised women. Initiatives like #EllesFontLaPolitique and Le Mouvement des Quartiers work to encourage political participation among women from marginalized communities.

- United Kingdom

The UK is a leader in the European context when it comes to political diversity. Following the 2024 general election, women hold 40.5% of seats in the House of Commons (263 MPs). Of these, 50 MPs (7.7%) are Black and minoritised women, marking a significant increase in intersectional representation ([Fawcett Society](#)). Prominent BPoC women in UK politics include Diane Abbott (Labour), the UK's first Black female MP, Kemi Badenoch (Conservative), currently serving as Secretary of State for Business and Trade, and Zarah Sultana (Labour), a vocal advocate for racial justice. Numerous efforts—including Operation Black Vote, Elect Her, and The Parliament Project—have contributed to increasing the representation of BPoC women through mentoring, campaign training, and advocacy.

- Sweden and Finland

These two countries lead in gender parity within the EU, with women holding 45.6% and 45.5% of seats in parliament, respectively ([European Commission](#)). However, neither Sweden nor Finland regularly publishes disaggregated data on the racial or ethnic background of their MPs. Despite this lack of data, Sweden has seen some progress: Alice Bah Kuhnke, a former Minister of Culture and current Member of the European Parliament (Green Party), is one of the country's most prominent Black female politicians. Civil society organizations like FATTA!, Rädta Barnen, and Feministiskt Initiativ have played a role in advocating for intersectional feminism and more inclusive political participation. In Finland, BPoC representation remains marginal, though public discourse around anti-racism and equity in politics is growing.

These comparisons underscore that while Austria's overall female representation aligns with several developed nations, there remains a significant gap in the inclusion of BPoC women. The UK's progress in electing Black and minoritised women to Parliament serves as a potential model for Austria to enhance its diversity in political representation (fawcettsociety.org.uk)



©Photo: "Yes She Can" Kick off (October 2021): Harald Staudach

In Austria, Black and People of Colour (BPoC) women predominantly engage in political activism, community organizing, and advocacy rather than holding official political positions. Their contributions are vital in raising awareness about social justice issues, yet they often face obstacles in accessing formal political roles.

Organizations such as AFRA (AFRA International Center for Black Women's Perspectives) have been instrumental in creating platforms for Black women to engage in socio-political discourse. Founded in Vienna in 2006 by Beatrice Achaleke, AFRA focuses on reflecting the needs of Black women and children, developing individual solutions, and networking and lobbying at national and international levels. Their initiatives include programs like MIMPOL (Migrantinnen machen Politik), aimed at improving the political participation of immigrant women in Austria through mentorship and intercultural dialogue.

Despite these grassroots efforts, the underrepresentation of BPoC women in political offices underscores the need for targeted initiatives to support their political engagement and leadership development. Systemic barriers such as multiple discrimination, prejudice, and lack of access to political networks continue to hinder their full participation in political decision-making processes. ([Social Europe](#)).

2.1. EUROPEAN CONTEXT

Across Europe, BPoC women have been integral to grassroots political movements and activism, often facing heightened risks due to intersecting racial and gender biases. In Germany, ADEFRA (Afro-German Women) was founded in 1986 as the first grassroots activist group for Afro-German women. Inspired by American poet and activist Audre Lorde, ADEFRA has been pivotal in empowering Black women through education and political activism.

In the United Kingdom, organizations like the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD), established in 1978, have played a significant role in advocating for Black and Asian women's rights. OWAAD focused on issues affecting Black and Asian women in Britain, organizing national conferences and protests to address political and social injustices.

These grassroots movements have been essential in challenging systemic inequalities and advocating for the rights of BPoC women. However, despite their activism, BPoC women remain underrepresented in formal political positions across Europe. Efforts to improve this include mentorship programs, leadership training, and advocacy for inclusive policies within political parties. ([The GuardianSocial Europe](#)).



©Photo: Participants at Politics Roundtable (May 2025): Minitta Kandelbauer

3.1 WHY A MENTORING PROJECT

Mentoring for Black women and girls is critically important due to the systemic barriers and limited opportunities they face in the job market. Black women and girls often encounter discrimination, bias, and underrepresentation in many industries, which can significantly hinder their career progression. Mentoring provides them with guidance, support, and role models who understand their unique challenges and can offer valuable insights and strategies for overcoming these obstacles.

It helps build their confidence, skills, and professional networks, making it easier for them to navigate and succeed in environments where they might otherwise feel isolated or marginalized. By offering tailored support and creating a safe space for growth and development, mentoring empowers Black women and girls to reach their full potential and achieve their career aspirations, thereby contributing to a more equitable and inclusive job market.

3.1.2 THE 4 PILLAR SYSTEM

1. EMPOWERMENT THROUGH REPRESENTATION

The "Yes She Can" Mentoring Program is specifically designed for Black women, girls, and people of color (POC). Here, you'll have the unique opportunity to be mentored by successful women who share similar backgrounds and experiences. This representation is crucial in industries where diversity is often lacking, providing you with relatable role models who understand your unique challenges. By joining, you'll become part of a community that values and uplifts your identity, helping you see yourself reflected in the fields of technology, media, and politics.

2. OVERCOMING JOB MARKET BARRIERS

As a Black woman or girl, you may face significant obstacles in the job market, including discrimination and limited access to professional networks. Our mentoring program is dedicated to breaking down these barriers. We provide you with the tools, resources, and connections needed to succeed. Through workshops, networking events, and one-on-one mentoring, you'll gain valuable insights into navigating the job market, enhancing your employability, and finding opportunities that align with your career goals.

3. ACCESS TO EXCLUSIVE OPPORTUNITIES

As a participant in the "Yes She Can" Mentoring Program, you'll benefit from exclusive access to job opportunities, professional development resources, and additional support services such as CV checks and interview preparation. While our program aims to be affordable, you'll have the option to access these premium services for a nominal fee. This ensures we can continue to provide high-quality support while maintaining financial sustainability as a non-profit organization. This investment in your future can make a significant difference in your career trajectory, giving you a competitive edge in the job market.

4. A SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Our program creates a safe space where you can express yourself freely, ask questions, and share your experiences without fear of judgment. This supportive environment fosters personal and professional growth, encouraging you to take risks and pursue your ambitions with confidence. By joining "Yes She Can," you'll become part of a network of like-minded individuals committed to mutual support and collective success.

Joining the "Yes She Can" Mentoring Program is not just about advancing your career; it's about becoming part of a movement that aims to create systemic change and elevate the voices of Black women and girls in traditionally male-dominated industries. Take the next step towards your future and join us in making a difference.

4.1 GENESIS OF THE MENTORING PROGRAM (2012)

In 2012, the African Cultural Foundation (then operating under the name afriCult) launched a mentoring program in response to the stark underrepresentation of Black and People of Colour (BPoC) individuals—especially women—in Austrian politics and media. At the time, the challenge was not only the lack of BPoC individuals in positions of influence but also the difficulty in identifying mentors with relevant lived experience.

The initial program included a small but committed network of mentors such as Tanja Wehsely (SPÖ) and Alev Korun (The Greens), who offered invaluable guidance to young people from marginalized communities interested in political and public life. This pioneering effort laid the foundation for building sustained structures of support and representation for BPoC individuals across Austria.

4.1.2 EVOLUTION OF THE "YES SHE CAN" PROGRAM

- In 2022, the African Cultural Foundation revitalized its commitment to fostering BPoC women's leadership through the "Yes She Can" mentoring program. This initiative targets BPoC women and girls aged 18 to 36, offering mentorship from professionals in politics and media ([LinkedIn: cultural broadcasting, FH OÖ](#))
- The program provides a safe and empowering environment, addressing systemic barriers and offering tailored support to enhance participants' confidence and career prospects. ([African Cultural Foundation+LinkedIn](#))

4.1.3 EVOLUTION OF THE “YES SHE CAN” PROGRAM (2021–2022)

Building on this foundation, the mentoring initiative was revitalized in 2021 under the new name “Yes She Can,” following the organizational transition from afriCult to the African Cultural Foundation. The updated program, implemented in cooperation with partners such as the Schwarze Frauen Community (SFC) and NANCA, focused specifically on BPoC women and girls aged 18–36.

A simple yet effective curriculum was developed, which included:

- Three thematic workshops
- Three to four mentorship meetings per mentee
- A final diploma upon completion of the program

Notable mentors during the 2021/22 round included:

- **Dr. Mireille Ngosso**, SPÖ politician and Vienna City Councillor
- **Mag.a Faika El-Nagashi**, National Council MP for The Greens
- **Clara Akinyosoye, MA**, Chefredakteurin von M-Media und Journalistin beim ORF
- **Christl Clear, Influencerin**, Journalistin und Bloggerin
- **Clara Akinyosoye, MA**, editor-in-chief of M-Media and journalist at ORF
- **Mentors from FM4** and other media platforms were also approached

While the program successfully built a platform for mentorship, challenges such as summer availability of mentors and limited planning capacity among partner organizations were noted. Nevertheless, the program's visibility and credibility increased, and a new website was created: www.africancultural-foundation.org.

4.1.4 INITIATIVES TO ENHANCE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION (2022–2025)

Between 2022 and 2025, the African Cultural Foundation (ACF) implemented a range of initiatives aimed at increasing the political participation of Black and People of Colour (BPoC) women and girls in Austria.

These efforts included high-level policy roundtables—such as the 2025 “BPoC Experiences in Politics” event with VIDC—networking opportunities connecting young women with political and media leaders, advocacy campaigns for inclusive reforms, and educational workshops focused on political literacy and leadership.

Collectively, these initiatives sought to dismantle systemic barriers and foster a more equitable and representative political landscape.



©Photo (Minitta Kandelbauer): [Miriam Mona Mukalazi](#) (VIDC), [Mireille Ngosso](#) (former Politicians at Politics Roundtable (May 2025))

4.1.4.A. POLICY ROUNDTABLES

May 24, 2025: In collaboration with the Vienna Institute for International Dialogue and Cooperation (VIDC), ACF co-hosted a high-level roundtable titled "BIPoC Experiences in Politics." The event aimed to exchange experiences in politics, develop long-term measures for political participation, and celebrate joint achievements. Key speakers included:

- Folosade Soyoye, Municipal Councillor for the SPÖ in Salzburg City
- Talita Simek, Women's Spokesperson in Favoriten for the Greens Vienna
- Dr. Mireille Ngosso, General Practitioner and expert in gender and diversity-sensitive medicine, formerly a member of the Vienna City Council and State Parliament for the SPÖ
- Ursula Berner, Member of the Vienna State Parliament for the Greens
- Beverley Allen-Stingeder, Deputy State Women's Chairperson for the SPÖ

The discussion emphasized the need for structural responsibility in political parties to anchor diversity, rather than placing the burden solely on individual marginalized persons. It also highlighted the importance of political engagement beyond parliamentary spaces, recognizing activism, community work, and digital movements as vital forms of political influence. (vidc.org)

4.1.4.B NETWORKING EVENTS

ACF organized regular networking events to connect young BPoC women with established figures in politics, policy, and media. These events aimed to foster visibility and mentorship beyond formal programs, creating spaces for dialogue, collaboration, and the sharing of experiences.

4.1.4.C ADVOCACY CAMPAIGNS

The Foundation actively engaged with policymakers and institutions to advocate for greater inclusion of BPoC women in formal political structures. This included calls for diversity audits and equity-based reforms in party recruitment processes, aiming to address systemic barriers and promote inclusive practices within political institutions. ([African Cultural Foundation](http://AfricanCulturalFoundation.org))

4.1.4.D. EDUCATIONAL WORKSHOPS

ACF conducted political literacy workshops focused on equipping BPoC women with practical tools to navigate Austria’s political landscape. These workshops covered understanding party systems, developing leadership skills, and strategies for running for office, thereby empowering participants to engage effectively in political processes.

Together, these efforts reflect our belief that mentorship alone is not enough. Structural change requires continuous engagement, political education, and the creation of platforms that enable BPoC women to move from the margins of activism into formal leadership and decision-making roles.



©Photo (Minitta Kandelbauer): Diploma Ceremony (2022): Emily Joost (African Cultural Foundation), Adaora Ofoedu (African Cultural Foundation), “Yes She Can” Awardee, Faika El-Nagashi (Nationalrats Abgeordnete), Ifeoma Melissa Ofoedu (African Cultural Foundation)

From 2022 to 2025, several European countries have made tangible progress in increasing the political participation of Black and People of Colour (BPoC) women and girls.

While disparities remain, certain best practices have shown promising results in fostering more inclusive and representative political systems. This chapter highlights key strategies implemented across Europe and their impact on BPoC women in political spaces.

5.1. GENDER QUOTAS AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

Legislated gender quotas—particularly when backed by enforceable penalties—have proven to significantly improve women’s political representation across European democracies. Although quotas do not explicitly target BPoC women, they have opened pathways for broader representation within party structures.

- France: The “parité” law mandates political parties to field equal numbers of male and female candidates. As of 2022, women held over 39.5% of seats in the French National Assembly, up from 12% in 2000. While still underrepresented, racialized women have increasingly entered politics through these openings, such as Danièle Obono (La France Insoumise).
- Belgium and Ireland: These countries have introduced financial penalties for non-compliance with gender balance laws, encouraging parties to diversify candidate lists. This has resulted in incremental gains for racialized women, particularly at the local level where barriers to entry are somewhat lower.

6.1. ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND PARTY STRUCTURES

Countries with proportional representation systems, such as the Netherlands and Sweden, tend to elect more diverse candidates than those with majoritarian systems. These systems allow for more inclusive party lists and facilitate the election of minority women, especially when parties adopt zipper systems (alternating male and female candidates on lists).

- Sweden: A proportional system and a strong party commitment to diversity have contributed to the visibility of women of migrant backgrounds in national and municipal politics. Leila Ali Elmi, for example, became the first Somali-Swedish woman elected to the Riksdag in 2018.
- Germany: The introduction of internal party quotas and increased advocacy for intersectional representation within parties like Die Linke and Bündnis 90/Die Grünen have supported women of color gaining political ground. Aminata Touré, of Senegalese descent, became Vice President of Schleswig-Holstein's state parliament in 2022.

6.2. POLITICAL MENTORSHIP AND CAPACITY-BUILDING INITIATIVES

Mentorship programs, training academies, and civil society-led political literacy efforts have been instrumental in equipping BPoC women with the tools to enter political life:

- UK: Initiatives such as the Operation Black Vote and Equal Power campaign have provided mentoring, shadowing opportunities, and leadership training to BPoC women. These programs have supported the rise of politicians like Florence Eshalomi, Abena Oppong-Asare, and Zarah Sultana.
- Netherlands: Non-profit organizations have partnered with universities and local governments to offer training for women from migrant backgrounds, resulting in a higher number of racialized women in city councils and local administrative roles.

6.3. MEDIA REPRESENTATION AND PROTECTION FROM ABUSE

A consistent barrier for BPoC women in politics is online harassment and racist abuse, which often deters political participation. Some European countries have responded with new protections:

- UK and Germany have strengthened legal frameworks around hate speech and digital harassment, which disproportionately affect women of color in public life. These protections are essential for retention and support once BPoC women gain office.
- European Parliament Guidelines (2023) emphasize fair media representation, the elimination of stereotypical narratives, and increased coverage of diverse political voices. Efforts to amplify BPoC women in the public sphere can increase political ambition and normalize their presence in leadership roles.

6.4. INCLUSIVE PARTY RECRUITMENT AND DATA TRANSPARENCY

Several political parties across Europe have begun conducting diversity audits and publishing data on candidate demographics. This transparency promotes accountability and encourages structural reform.

- Ireland and the UK have seen parties adopt targeted outreach and diversity recruitment pledges, explicitly committing to the inclusion of candidates from racialized backgrounds. While progress remains slow, such practices are critical in dismantling gatekeeping norms within party hierarchies.



©Photo (Minitta Kandelbauer): Diploma Ceremony (2022) & Politics Roundtable (2025): [Miriam Mona Mukalazi](#) (VIDC), Hager Eissa (Politics Mentee)

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- OWAAD - Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (UK)
- Each One Teach One (Germany)
- Girls' Parliament (Germany)
- Operation Black Vote (UK)
- The Parliament Project (UK)
- Elect Her (UK)
- FATTA! (Sweden)
- Rädde Barnen (Save the Children Sweden)
- Feministiskt Initiativ (Sweden)
- Schwarze Frauen Community (Austria)
- NANCA (Austria)



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