

HELLENIC HEROINE

Chair of the Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities Committee and passionate advocate of feminist politics, Anna Karamanou spoke to Elinor Blair about her desire to see real equality in both the home and the workplace.

"It is a Greek characteristic," shrugs Anna Karamanou in her top floor corner office in the Parliament, "everybody has an interest in politics." When I ask about her launch into the political landscape she explains that even in school she had a special interest in what was going on in Greece and in the rest of the world.

But it was after the fall of the dictatorship, whilst working in telecommunications that her political interest was first sparked. "There was a great hope for democracy, for consolidating democratic institutions - the trade unions which were abolished by the dictatorship were founded again and I joined the political party PASOK right from the beginning in 1974."

Having worked in an industry highly segregated by sex, her interest in feminism also came to the fore. Her role in coming to the European Parliament has been clear - to make her voice heard on a larger platform. "I wanted to use the post to promote and implement my ideas - as a trade unionist of course I had a voice, but it was not so strong. I wanted to be more helpful in achieving gender equality, in the fight for women's rights, for human rights and for minority rights."

Indeed, discrimination of any kind has always been a keen motivator for Karamanou, "Gender, social origin,

colour all of these discriminations have always been appalling to me. We cannot talk of democracy when there is so much discrimination, this is not real democracy; no, this is democracy for the few and not for the whole population."

During her time as Chair of the Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities, Karamanou believes that the most important piece of legislation to pass through during her tenure will be the revision of the 1976 Directive on Equal Pay for men and women. But she feels that there is a need for much more legislation concerning women's rights.

"The policy of the Union has concentrated on what is going on in the workplace. It has favoured, of course, equality for men and women in the work place - equal pay for equal work - and this is good, it is very good, but we have to take care of other issues such as violence against women, trafficking of women, and the sexual exploitation of women."

When asked what she sees as the greatest change in the women's rights movement over the past 25 years, she replies that despite the progress, inequalities still exist. "More and more women have entered the labour market and have economic independence. Women no longer accept dependency upon their husbands. Marriage has stopped being a career for the majority of

women and this is a great change."

So why then do so many young women fear feminism and avoid being named as a feminist at all costs? Why the backlash? "Because young women take it for granted," she responds with vehemence, "you know - they have not suffered like my generation has suffered from discrimination in the workplace. I have lived this discrimination, hearing them saying that you are women - that you have to work as a secretary...whilst men, because they are men, they belong in other categories that had better salaries and better promotions."

"Young women cannot understand this, but some of them, most of them, when they get married, then they realise that equality is still on paper and not in daily life. Although some things have changed regarding burden sharing, domestic work is still mainly done by women," she claims. It takes experience of family life and "raising children to understand inequalities and discrimination," she believes.

She agrees however that there have been many advances, "we have more autonomy, we have more choice to decide about our own lives." But she adds: "still we have to fight against double standards. We are not judged by the same criteria and for women it is much more difficult to enter the political sphere and succeed. We are much more easily criticised. Prejudices are still persistent and resistant to change."

And this leads to another subject of great passion; namely the lack of female representation in the public and political domain. She believes that there needs to be a more, "balanced participation of men and women in the decision making process. If we really believe that gender equality is of value, and one of the basic

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values of the EU, we have to find the appropriate policies and strategies to achieve it. We cannot talk about democracy and have this under-representation of women in the decision making process."

She points to the lack of female participation in the Convention discussions, "one in five, is this the policy of fifty years of gender equality - is this democracy?" she exclaims. "Women are still excluded from the right to decide the future, to decide about the future of our countries, of ourselves, of our children and our grandchildren so we have a long way to go."

But with the increase of women at university and going into professional roles, what is holding them back from entering the political arena? "Men are used to being the decision makers, and power holders," she says, "they are the main players in the public sphere." With the development of women's rights being a relatively new development, and women only recently being able to gain access to higher education she says that, "we have a negative cultural background which influences what both men and

C.V.

BORN: 3 May, 1947

EDUCATION: Greek and English literature, University of Athens

CAREER: Greek Telecommunications Organisation (OTE) 1969-1991 and former trade unionist, author of "Greek Women in Education and at Work" (1984)

PARLIAMENT: Member of the Bureau, Chair of Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities, Member of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs

women think." She explains, "women themselves do not really believe that they are equal to men, there are areas that they recognise that men have to have the first and the last word."

And as for those that believe a women's committee is an irrelevancy in the 21st century, she argues that as yet, nothing is a given, and that "we have a long way to go until we achieve real equality." There are still many disparities, "even within the European Parliament so I think that this committee has not yet completed its role."

"If we achieve a gender balance in all the decision making bodies, if we achieve real equal pay for work of equal value in the workplace, if we achieve a fair share of the domestic work and the raising of children, and if we achieve a fair share of

the positions of power in economic life, then okay, I would be the first to say we don't need such a committee."

"But as long as there are all these striking inequalities in Europe of the 21st century we have to keep these women's organisations alive and alert."

Clearly the battle for female emancipation is far from over in her opinion, but if life had taken a different path for Anna Karamanou she says that she would have liked to have been a painter. "When I was young at school, I was a good painter, everybody said that I had a talent. I think you can offer through art, and also through politics". Yet even as an artist, she explains, at the same time, "I would also be a politician, for artists' rights and for the rights of women in the arts." ■

