

Implementation of The Principle of Gender Equality in Politics, in particular in the Composition of the European Parliament (στα αγγλικά)

COMMITTEE ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

SPEECH BY ANNA KARAMANOU, CHAIRPERSON

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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PRINCIPLE OF GENDER EQUALITY IN POLITICS, IN PARTICULAR IN THE COMPOSITION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

I am delighted to be here in Rome, to address the important issue of gender equality in the political decision making process, especially in view of the forthcoming European Parliament elections. I would like to thank our hosts, the Italian Presidency, and all the organisers for their hard work and preparation to make this event possible.

This conference sends a strong message: that the role of women in politics concerns all of us, in terms of creating a more equal, social and inclusive Europe.

Setting the scene: Why should women go into politics?

Before embarking upon any analysis of the implementation of gender equality in the

political decision making with a particular focus on the composition of the European Parliament, I feel it is necessary to state why women should go into politics.

"I would boycott that legislature which will not have a proper share of women members". So declared Mahatma Gandhi unequivocally over 70 years ago at the Second Round Table Conference convened in London by the British Government in September 1931 to consider framing a new constitution for India.

A clear under-representation of women in political decision-making poses the problem of the legitimacy of existing political structures.

There simply cannot be a true democracy as the majority of the electorate is either a minority or absent from the political decision-making centres altogether. When there are hardly any women participating in decision-making, the legitimacy of the outcome of political decision-making may not be the same for both women and men. This may give rise to public mistrust towards the representative system. An ultimate consequence may be that women will refuse to accept laws and policies that have been drafted or adopted without their participation.

The European Network – Women in Decision-Making (1992–1996) has elaborated a number of arguments that account for the necessity of women's inclusion in political life and leadership:

1. Reinforcement of democracy

In any society, democracy is based upon the participation of all people in the process of decision-making. Women constitute half of the population and are entitled to be represented proportionately, in order for democracy to function properly.

2. Application of the principle of gender equality

Equality is a universal human right. The division of labour and the double standards should be abolished; both men and women are entitled to participate on equal terms in both private and public spheres, so that the historical exclusion of women be transcended.

3. Efficient use of human resources

Women constitute half of the world's pool of potential talent and ability and their under-representation deprives society of efficient use of human resources.

4. Enrichment of political culture with different interests and value systems

Women's historical exclusion from politics and their confinement into the private domain has led to gender differences in values and interests. In any democratic society, political decisions should reflect the interests and values of all the people. Women's contribution accounts for a particular concern for justice, dialogue, an ethical dimension of politics, a talent for setting priorities, an awareness of the value of consensus, a facility for agreement due to a higher sense of social solidarity and a higher concern for future generations.

5. Rejuvenation of political culture

Women's different set of principles, ideas and values, are more compatible with the social needs and political climate of our times; women's participation in political life can contribute to redefining political priorities, placing new items on the political agenda and provide new perspectives on mainstream political issues.

How to implement gender equality in the political bodies?

If we look back over the short history of women's human rights, real progress has been made. It was not until the beginning of the 19th century in Europe that women started to emerge from darkness and appear in the limelight of public life. The 20th century began with the demand of women for equal access in education, paid employment and politics and ended with the claim for a fair and balanced gender participation in the democratic institutions and political decision-making process. However, the political sphere is still remaining a domain to be conquered.

So what do we have to do to implement gender equality in the political arena?

In my view, initiatives to combat the lack of balanced representation between women and men in decision making can generally be grouped in three categories:

- a. Initiatives addressing structural conditions.**
- b. Programmes directed at increasing the efficiency of the transition of new candidates into positions of power and**
- c. Initiatives directed at cultural acceptance of balanced decision making through awareness raising campaigns directed at diverse publics.**

Let me briefly explain these initiatives in greater detail.

The electoral systems play a role in determining the level of female political representation in the European Union. Through examining statistical indicators alone, it becomes apparent that those member states with the highest levels of female political representation (Sweden, Finland, Denmark and the Netherlands) are those which also have proportional or mixed electoral systems. In contrast, an examination of those

member states with the lowest levels of female political representation (Greece, France and the United Kingdom) reveals majoritarian or mixed electoral systems.

Nevertheless, electoral system alone cannot fully explain the differing levels of female political representation across the European Union. Other factors which should be considered in conjunction with electoral system are:

The selection process and criteria; party structure and its conduciveness to female promotion within a political hierarchy; party willingness to place women in eligible positions on electoral lists; and quotas and affirmative Action, both at national and party level; voluntary or legally enforced measures to ensure numerical and executive female representation, especially with regard to placement on electoral lists.

One of the main functions of political parties is to nominate and back their candidates for office (through logistic and often financial support). In this way, the selection process of candidates is essential in ensuring female representation.

Selection of a candidate for office is ultimately decided by the central power of a political party. In an attempt to establish uniformity in the selection process, clear guidelines have been set up to control both selection criteria and the process itself. Those wanting to become parliamentary candidates often have to undergo a long political apprenticeship or political volunteer work before they have a good chance of being selected. This can prove a problem for many women, who due to constraints of family, have less time available for such party work. In many selection committees (especially those from a majoritarian electoral system), a "successful" candidate is often seen to be a white professional male, and the selectors might

feel obliged in selecting such a "safe" candidate over a female one. In addition, nearly all political parties are headed by male politicians who are the party's role model; it is likely therefore that masculine selection criteria will dominate decisions.

As regards the second initiative to increase the efficiency of the transition of new candidates into positions of power, parties can take different measures to encourage women to enter politics and public life. At the lowest (and non-electoral) level, these measures can be organisational, training or logistical.

Organisational measures include the establishment of a women's branch within a political party. This is very popular on a worldwide scale, being found in three countries out of four. It is also popular at a European level, with all member states (with the exception of Denmark) having parties that have organised women's branches. Training includes courses that specifically prepare women for being candidates or M.P.s. Logistical measures include the provision of childcare and the reconciliation of political meeting times with family responsibilities.

Regarding the third initiative aiming at changing the cultural acceptance of male dominated structures, both member state governments and NGOs have a role to play in encouraging women to stand for and participate in elections. Whilst there are many NGOs that campaign to better the status of women, few are specifically dedicated to encouraging women to participate in public life. In Finland, the Coalition of Finnish Women's Associations for Joint Action has a membership of more than 600,000 women, and over 20% of all women in Finland are members of a registered women's organisation. Before elections, these organisations become active, with publicity and information campaigns. In the

United Kingdom, the 300 Group (campaigning for 300 female MPs in the lower house and more women in public life) and EMILY's list (financial support for female candidates, whatever their party) encourage women's candidature in elections, while the Fawcett Society campaigns to increase the influence of women's issues at an electoral level.

EU approach to implement gender equality in the political decision making process

I would like to remind of how we are dealing with the implementation of gender equality in the political decision making process at EU level.

Let me start by presenting you some raw data.

[\[1\]](#)

From 1991 to 1999 the number of women increased from 19% to 30% in the European Parliament, from 10% to 25% in the European Commission and from 11% to 23% in the Member States governments. Today, the European Commission counts five women Commissioners and the European Parliament scores a female political representation of 30% women MEPs (187 women were elected in 1999; nowadays, 188 are seated). By countries, the country that counts with the largest representation of women MEPs, achieving full parity is Sweden, followed by Finland with 43 % women MEPs and France with 40 %. The country with the lowest representation of women MEPs is Italy with only 10,3%, Greece with 16 % and Portugal with 20 %.

As regards European Parliament's Committees, the largest representation of women MEPs is in the Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities, which I have the honour to chair, with 89, 5% followed by the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Consumer Policy with 54, 2 % and the Committee on Culture,

Youth, Education, Media and Sport with 42, 9%. The Committee with lowest representation of women MEPs is the Committee on Foreign Affairs with 16, 9% and the Committee on Regional Policy, Transport and Tourism.

I need hardly remind you that, despite these fine figures, there is a serious risk and a great fear that women will be less represented in the European Parliament in the new legislature (2004–2009). Recent facts prove that this positive trend may be reversed: in particular, the low representation of women representatives in the Convention for a Draft Constitution (17 %, with only one woman in the Praesidium) and the low representation of women among the observers from the Accession Countries in the European Parliament (14%), caused by the fact that the percentage of women in Parliament in the Accession countries has seriously declined with the transformation to market economy and free parliamentary elections, a problem that needs to be addressed further by EU's institutions and respective governments.

Let me now turn to the efforts that have been made in the 1990's by the European Union to ensure a gender balanced representation in decision making process. The Union's efforts can be divided into two main phases:

1. The first phase running from 1991 to 1995 concerns the adoption of the Third Action Programme on Equal Opportunities (1991–1995), which led to the experts network Women in Decision-Making to the Athens Declaration in 1992, the Charter of Rome in 1996 and the Beijing Platform of Action in 1995.
2. The second phase running from 1996 to 2000 concerns the adoption of the Council Recommendation 96/694 on 2 December 1996 on the promotion of positive action for achieving a gender balance in decision-making process,

[\[2\]](#) and the Fourth Framework Programme on Equal Opportunities (1996–2000). Three years after the adoption of the Council Recommendation, in October 1999, nine indicators were established by the Council for measuring progress in women's participation in power structures. The indicators showed that participation is far from being sufficient both at national and EU level.

What is the European Parliament doing now to ensure gender equality in the forthcoming elections in June 2004?

Already on 18 January 2001, the European Parliament adopted a resolution based on my report on the implementation of Council Recommendation 96/694 on the balanced participation of women and men in the decision-making process.[\[3\]](#) My report concluded that the Council's recommendation had been partially implemented by the Member States and that further efforts were needed to draw up a more global strategy since women continued to be seriously under-represented as candidates for public office. While the report welcomed the good example of the European Parliament, where women held nearly 30% of seats following the elections in 1999, it considered this level insufficient and therefore called for the promotion of a gender balance in all policy fields and committees at EU and national level, which should not be below 40% for each sex. The report urged Member States in which the participation rate of women in the decision-making process was low to contemplate a reform of their existing arrangements through various measures, which should be binding if possible, such as, a system of quotas or targets to be reached to ensure that large numbers of women came to hold positions of responsibility and the need for women to be well placed on electoral lists, as for example using the "zipper"

system. Political parties should also overhaul their organisational set-ups and their internal procedures so as to remove obstacles. The resolution also called for the creation of a European Network to promote women in decision-making

The Committee on Women's rights and equal opportunities prepared an opinion on the Draft Treaty on the European constitution on 3 September 2003 where it regrets that the Convention did not incorporate an article in the institutional chapter requiring a balanced representation of women and men in the EU institutions and that, although each Member State must present three candidates for the post of Commissioners in which both genders have to be represented, there is still a long way to go.[\[4\]](#)

On 11 June 2003, the Committee on Women's rights and equal opportunities, with Lone Dybkjaer as Rapporteur, organised a public hearing aiming at raising awareness on the importance of achieving a gender-balanced representation of women and men in decision-making process.

As it was pointed out in this hearing, the problem does not lay within the fact that electorate does not vote for women but in the constituency parties and in their selection mechanisms.

On 6 November, the European Parliament has adopted a Resolution, based on an own-initiative report of the Committee on Women's rights and equal opportunities, on how to ensure balanced representation of women and men for the European Parliament elections in 2004.[\[5\]](#)

In this resolution, the Parliament calls on Governments in all Member States and Accession Countries, to urgently review the differential impact of electoral systems on the political

representation of women in elected bodies and to consider the adjustment or reform of these systems by taking legislative measures to promote balanced participation or by encouraging political parties to introduce quota systems, such as the zipper system. The Parliament also calls on political parties, at national and European level, to review their party structures and procedures to remove all barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against the participation of women. The Parliament echoes the conclusions of the Syracuse Ministerial Conference, and requests all political parties to ensure that women be given a minimum share of 30 per cent on the party lists for the European elections and to initiate a gender sensitisation of their party leadership.

In this respect, in my capacity of Chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Women's rights and Equal opportunities, I have sent the Syracuse Presidency conclusions to all leaders of political parties, as it was agreed and asked by the Ministers and the Commissioner Anna Diamantopoulou.

Let me finish by saying that women's participation in political decision making process is an imperative and that the European Parliament's signal must be very clear: we need more women into politics!

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