

European Database

The Women in Decision-Making	
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1. Anna, can I ask how you first got involved in European politics?

I was elected to the European Parliament in February 1997 but I have always been very much interested in what was going on in Europe. Since the Greek accession in 1981, I have been working on various European groups. For example, I was an expert working for the European Commission's Equal Opportunities Unit. I was the national representative for Greece in two networks: Women in Employment and Women in the Decision-making Process. So I have been involved in European policy for the past 20 years. At a national level I have also been very active in Equal Opportunities and Human Rights issues.

But my first involvement in politics was as a student. I liked to influence things and became an activist and got quite involved as a trade unionist. I saw much unfairness and inequality, and I had a dream of changing the world, but it was very difficult! In 1974 I joined the political

party, PASOK, and I was also very active in the trade union. So my political career began at the national level but even as a child I had very cosmopolitan ideas and I always saw Greece in a broader, more global context. I always enjoyed working in a multicultural environment.

2. Have you encountered any difficulties in your political career?

When I first got involved in the 1970s, the situation was not very good for women in politics. At that time, women's participation was not good in Greece and even in local politics there were hardly any women to be found. I was working in an environment that was hostile to women and I had to overcome many barriers. However, the worst barriers were self-imposed: it was not easy to be assertive. I have a family and I have been married twice and divorced twice. After I got my second divorce I gained more self-confidence. Men are used to getting help and support but they do not accept women who are in power. It is very rare to find a husband who will be supportive to a woman. In Greece, men and women have difficulty accepting women in power.

3. It sounds like you paid a high price.

Yes, but I found politics worthwhile and rewarding. I think women give a lot and take little – and their contribution is never assessed. Most men behave in a stereotypical way. They enjoy power. They are strong, tough, have few sentiments and do not express feelings. Few men question this way of life. It's hard for men but I haven't seen movement on their part. Maybe there has been movement in Scandinavian countries. I think men there have realised the benefits of women's qualities. The fact is, women are less violent. If we have more

involvement of women in the public sphere then we will have better policies. Women bring new ideas and capabilities. They are less aggressive. They are peace-makers, but they are rarely involved in foreign affairs or in peace negotiations. Women have not had the chance to try doing things their way.

4. What contribution do you think women have made?

Well, women belong to different parties, of course, and they have to follow the party line but women are more likely than men to support issues such as peace, human rights, the environment and health. I was pleased when the leader of the Socialist Group recently praised women for their contribution to the drafting of the Charter on Fundamental Human Rights. Women have a special contribution to make in this area and they also have a different perspective on environmental issues. Last November we also quickly set up an all-women delegation to Palestine and Israel. This was a cross-party initiative where we were having discussions with various women and we found there was a consensus between the Israeli and the Palestinian women. The problem is that women still do not have power in these situations but we are beginning to have an influence.

The situation is worse at the national level. My toughest experience was working in the decision-making bodies of the trade unions where I found people very hostile towards women. This attitude particularly touches women at the higher education level and women in the public sphere.

5. Does your party have an Equal Opportunities policy?

Of all the parties in Greece, my party is the best – but putting it into practice has not been easy. We have a 20 per cent quota for women on the central committee but men hate quotas because this meant that some men had to resign to make place for women. We are now preparing for the local elections in October 2002 and Vasso Pappandreou introduced a new law that makes it compulsory for one third of the list to be women. Of course, this does not mean they will all get elected. We also have the parties saying that they cannot find such a high number of women but, at the same time, 57 per cent of university students in Greece are women. Examinations are held across the country and when we have real equal opportunities women are better performers than men, which is why we have more women in universities. But you know we see the same problem at the local level where they say they cannot find women for their seats. They think women are not capable. The result is that only 15 women are mayors out of a total of more than 1000. And nobody thinks this is a problem. Nobody. They think women in politics is not a priority. Here in the European Parliament, they see women politicians, such as the Greek commissioner, Anna Diamandopoulou, Vasso Pappandreou, and the Greek women Europarliamentarians, and they cannot imagine how difficult it is for women in Greece.

6. What impact do you think European Equal Opportunities Policy has had in Greece?

European policy has helped Greek women a lot, especially concerning changes in legislation. Greece now has progressive family law where women can keep their maiden name. I kept my maiden name. I would have lost my identity. I never used my first or my second husbands' names. When I divorced my first husband, I gave my name to my daughter. The law allowed me to

do that. The only field where we are far behind is regarding women's participation in political life. I think this will only change if we introduce legislation. Look at France. A year ago it changed the law and introduced a quota of 50/50 for all political positions. You cannot stay at home and say you don't like this and that. You have to get involved and try to change it from within. Otherwise, it is not possible to change anything. I understand why women underestimate themselves. I understand why they do not get involved. But women have to do something collectively and as individuals. We have to act individually within our families and with our partners. In public life, we have to take the positions that belong to us, to have half the power. Not only because this is fair, but because we can make a real contribution to creating a less violent world, to creating peace. Women want a more balanced world and greater equality between people and countries but they do not have the power to achieve this. Men have the power but their value systems are different.

7. Do you notice discrimination in European policy-making?

To tell you the truth, no. I haven't noticed any direct discrimination. I feel comfortable working in the European Parliament. If I search . . . I feel the Women's Rights Committee is underestimated and under-valued by my male colleagues. We have had staff shortages and I feel the Parliament does not take as much care as it does with other committees. Men have the upper hand in how we deal with foreign policy and defence matters but step by step women are gaining more and more power. Women's values and ways of thinking are beginning to influence things. Unfortunately we still have to play the game by men's rules and that is a struggle. But things are getting better.

8. How is working in the European Parliament different to politics at national level?

I like working in the European Parliament as I have always preferred working with people from different cultures. National politics, especially in Greece, is connected to the electorate. Within the party there is a lot of competition between candidates, which does not favour women. The way elections are conducted means there is a lot of competition among people in the same party. They run personal campaigns and spend money to promote themselves. This favours people with money. Usually women do not have enough money to run, which is one reason why they don't enter politics. Nor do they have the necessary connections, for example with the media. European elections are easier. There is a national list and the party decides who should represent them. Therefore you do not have to spend money, etc.

9. Is there a final word you would like to say?

I would like to make a plea for solidarity. Women in decision-making positions often have to face a hostile environment from men and from women, and they often get little support. We must remember that if women go higher, we all go higher, so we should work together for this.