

SIW Regional Meeting: EU Enlargement-A Historical Challenge for Women (στα αγγλικά)

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT



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EU ENLARGEMENT: A HISTORICAL CHALLENGE FOR WOMEN

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The Historic Accession Treaty signed in 16 April 2003 on a symbolic site, under the Acropolis in Athens, represents the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity for the European Union. From now on, the continuation of Europe will be a history of peace, creation, cooperation and solidarity, an area which attracts and inspires, an area that is respected and heeded.

Based on common interests and shared values, democracy and respect of human rights and particularly the rights of women, the enlargement of EU demonstrates our ability to overcome the division of European countries into two opposing camps, Eastern and Western Europe and to build a political and economic union without any excluding members inside Europe.

In the European Parliament, European Socialists agreed that "***We want the European Union to be more than a single market. We want it to be a Union of shared values to meet the challenges of the future***". I wish to add that gender equality, not as a numerical equality, but as an equality of substance for every woman and man; that is the cornerstone and a recipe for the success of our common endeavour.

Women in Europe, have an important and positive role to play in politics, not only internal EU politics and enlargement politics, but also in peace and security world-wide. Women can contribute considerably to a better world. The escalation of the war against women, which results in a situation, where more and more women around the world live in terror and whose human rights are not recognised, has to come to an end.

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The EU legislation on equal opportunities for women and men as well as directives on this issue are part of the "package" which the new members needed to adopt before joining the EU. Legislation and standards in the field of employment and social policy, covering various sectors, such as health and safety at work, consultation and participation of workers, protection of employees and vocational training and education are other areas in which the accession countries legislation and practice must comply with EU standards.

Thus, the enlargement process has provided some important policy instruments to increase equality between men and women and also to fight against exclusion based on ethnic, geographical or social origin. However, critical voices have claimed that the EU has failed to

convey to the concerned countries the importance of adhering to this social dimension of the acquis.

Despite the progress made so far by the majority of the new accession countries by the adoption of new laws and making changes to their constitutions, there is often a big gap between drafting new legislation and its effective implementation. The EU for its part has shown little real commitment to promoting and supporting the candidate countries in their work to ensure women's rights.

In the majority of the candidate countries, women have been very active in the labour market, in many cases to a far greater extent than in the 15 Member States. However, as pointed out, the transition process has been accompanied by increased unemployment rates. In certain countries, women are either directly or indirectly encouraged to go back to being house wives and full-time carers, in order to reserve the decreased number of jobs to the male population and, at the same time, solve the increasing problem of lack of child care facilities. The EU, as well as the governments of the candidate countries, have failed to counteract this development.

The European Parliament Women's Rights Committee and Equal Opportunities, which I have the privilege to chair, has played a crucial role to debate gender issues, to enact and monitor legislation as well as to promote new initiatives and ideas to comply with the provisions of the Treaty concerning gender equality. In the European Parliament, our Committee has, on a number of occasions since the beginning of the enlargement process, considered and debated what could be the impact of the enlargement of the European Union on policies relating to gender equality in the candidate countries. What we have

particularly tried with the considerable contribution from experts and women politicians from the accession countries is assessing the extent to which the accession to EU would influence positively the social, political and professional life of women.

In recent years, specific legislative instruments, i.e. the Treaty of Amsterdam and directives designed to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women and men which have been adopted at the EU level and which form part of the "Community acquis", constitute a considerable achievement for Europe. In this respect, the process of enlargement of the EU represents an excellent opportunity for the accession countries to share this achievement and to promote gender equality objectives in all spheres of life.

The necessary institution building or reinforcement of institutional and administrative capacity in the area is a vital prerequisite to full implementation of the "acquis" and the candidate countries should ensure full and effective implementation of the "acquis", as regards gender equality. In this context, the Women's Rights Committee has insisted that the European Union should promote and support with financial and human resources the candidate countries, in their effort to efficiently implement the "acquis" on gender equality by, among others, an increased use of the Phare programme and other funds to build appropriate institutional mechanisms.

We are well aware that in certain new country members, there has been a considerable progress on gender equality in terms of legislation and institutional framework, but there is still a need for further effort to promote the economic, social and political equality of women. Having regard to the negative effects of the transition process for many new members,

we can point out that women are the first victims of budget cuts in provision of childcare facilities, education and in social protection systems that underpin the reconciliation of work and family life. Nevertheless, we know that the majority of women of candidate countries wish to combine work with family life. In this respect, there is a specific need, beside the "Community acquis", to safeguard and improve the provision of childcare facilities and other social services necessary for combining professional and private life.

Furthermore, other issues of particular concern, which most if not all candidate countries share, are trafficking of women and sexual exploitation, prostitution, under-age prostitution and child pornography, as well as domestic violence. which are the most constitute the most extreme form of a non-women friendly society.

An additional concern is the participation of women at all stages in the decision-making process, particularly the European Parliament elections due to take place in 2004. During the enlargement process, relatively few women were involved. Including women in politics can challenge the dominant view of politics, legitimizing ideologies and mainstream transitional concepts: this insight can provide a framework for reshaping political ideas and practices regarding gender equality politics, in the new members and can contribute to the emancipation, tolerance and recognition, connected to the idea of active citizenship. To this respect, the governments of the accession countries should increase the presence of women at all levels of decision-making process, encourage and support efforts of associations and organisations to promote women's access to the decision-making process and launch public campaigns to alert public opinion to the usefulness and advantages for society as a

whole of balanced participation by women and men in decision-making.

Gender inequalities are not only specific to countries in line of accession to the EU, but are also present in the EU Member States. As an illustration, let me mention the weak representation of women in the recently created Convention on the future of Europe. I find this unbalanced composition a very worrying issue, since equality of women and men is a prerequisite for the building of a democratic Europe.

However, it is worthwhile mentioning that considerable progress has been made during the 1990's by the European Union. Before 1994, less than 20% of MEPs were women, a figure which rose to 27% thanks to an ambitious campaign led in 1994. 31% of the 626 members of the European Parliament are now women. From 1991 to 1999 the number of women increased from 10% to 25% in the European Commission and from 11% to 23% in the Member States governments. This balance must be safeguarded at all costs but I would like to point out that barely 14% of the Parliamentary Observers sent to the EP by the accession countries are women, with some countries with not even one woman observer which is fairly a deplorable example. Efforts must therefore be stepped up so that the proportion of women in Parliament did not decline following the 2004 elections. Our priority concern and our aim should be, in my opinion, to have a common electorate system and to ensure a gender balance in the European Parliament.

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To conclude, I wish to recall what I consider as the most important issues for our common

gender equality agenda and for our future shared framework to ensure that gender equality becomes an integral part of political action by socialists.

First, we must ensure that decent proportions of the public funds for enlargement are allotted to the promotion of gender equality and the elimination of inequalities. Enlargement is important enough to serve as a case study for a deepening of democracy. We must take into account women's particular needs and interests within the EU support programmes. Specific funding should be designated to women's projects within these programmes.

Second, violence and trafficking are gender issues: women and men are not subject to violence and trafficking in the same way. For historical reasons, the breach of women's rights has lately come about as a political issue of great concerns in the European Union and worldwide. We must have a consistent and progressive agenda on combating all forms of violence against women.

Third, a political agenda which places gender equality as a priority is credible only with an equal representation of women and men in decision making positions. For political parties, zip lists, quotas are some the means used to increase the proportion of elected women and move towards parity democracy. The low representation of women in the Convention as well as some recent elections show that there is no "natural" movement towards an equalisation of the numbers of women and men in positions of power. It resorts from a political will. Our parties should be exemplary in this respect.

Fourth, the visibility of women and gender issues has become even more essential in the enlargement process that the very conception of equality is not understood in the same way

everywhere. Women's experience has been very different in post communist countries and in Western Europe. If gender equality policies are to be successful, this must be both researched and debated.

In order to achieve equality between women and men in the new members, gender mainstreaming should be our guiding principle. Reforms should not be carried out in the accession countries, before they have been analysed as to their effect on equality between women and men. It is essential that economic aims set up are not counterproductive to those in the field of social policy, employment and equality between women and men. Additionally, data and statistics produced in the candidate countries are seldom gender disaggregated. This makes it difficult to assess how the accession process will affect women and men respectively. This current information gap needs to be addressed by the EU and the new members alike.

As a final note, I am convinced as a woman, as a European and as a socialist that equality is not a luxury, it is a necessity, not only for the labour market but to promote a better understanding of public policies, of conflicts and their resolution, of the aspirations of people and their fears in a globalise and complex world.