

Challenges facing women in politics (στα αγγλικά)

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Exchanging experiences and assessing
progress"
"Challenges facing women in politics"**

• Ø **INTRODUCTION**

I would like to start my speech by quoting a man, a well-known intellectual, who wrote:

"It could be certainly predicted that a greater participation of women in politics would lead to a less violent world. Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom and war, may have been the female model in ancient times, however, in the contemporary world, female influence is definitely catalytic against militarism and for peace", professor Francis Fukuyama advocated in his article titled "If women ruled the world"

At a time when violence prevails around the world, I strongly believe that our continent, and world as a whole, would be a better place to live, if more women were to be involved in politics; there are indications that women decision-makers, if present in sufficient numbers, differ from their male colleagues in the priorities they set in their work and their approach towards certain issues. In this difficult time, where important questions beg for an answer and major changes need to take place, the issue at stake is what needs to be done in order to create a better world and what share women deserve to be given in this attempt.

- Ø **Advantages of women's participation in decision-making**

- · **Women as agents of peace**

While acknowledging the dangers in generalising, I do believe that women, generally, bring a different perspective from men. Very often, especially when looking around and seeing all this violence and war situations that dominate the world scene, I wonder what our world would be like if a considerable number of women were in power over the last centuries and political culture was therefore infused with their values. I strongly believe that our world would be more humane, human relations would be appreciated on a different ground whereas violence wouldn't be necessarily the way to solve differences between people and nations.

- · **A balanced sharing of power and responsibilities for a balance in economic, social, cultural and political life**

The under-representation of women in decision-making certainly constitutes a loss for society as a whole because it does not allow the interests and needs of the whole population to be catered for in full. That is why the European

Network "Women in Decision-making" was set up in 1992 in order to elaborate ways and means to bridge the gap between men and women in representative political bodies. According to its analyses, women's under-representation results in a serious loss of talent and expertise and a failure to engage with women's particular concerns. Democracy will acquire a true and dynamic sense when women and men together define the values they wish to uphold in their political, economic, social and cultural life and together take the relevant decisions. Women's absence from political centres has negative impact upon development, due to lack of utilization of precious human resources. A balanced sharing of power and responsibilities between men and women will enrich political culture, will improve the quality of life of the whole population in Europe, and will bring a new balance in the world in general. A gender balanced participation in politics should be the obvious consequence of the balance existing in nature. We feel that this balance existing in nature, if transferred both into private and public domains, it's very likely to create a similar balance in all spheres of economic, social, cultural and political life.

- • **More women in power for a stronger political agenda on social issues related to quality of life**

Women have proved to be more sensitive to social issues, more imaginative and less technocratic. Wherever women participate in public affairs, they put forward issues which are very often neglected from the male political agenda altogether; It is estimated that if politics adopted women's values, there would be more social solidarity among people and nations, there would be no wars and conflicts due to religious fanaticism and extreme nationalism; additionally, there would be more awareness

about social issues related to quality of life such as protection of the environment, social policy and welfare, health care, education and combating of drug-use and human trafficking.

Furthermore, problems of daily life would be more adequately addressed, and more satisfactorily solved, if more women were in power, since they are the ones who suffer from them: violence against women, incompatibility between family life and working life, lack of infrastructure for looking after young children, disabled and elderly people, medical care, inadequate transportation and degradation of environment are among the problems that we are facing in everyday life, but not enough effort has ever been made to eliminate them.

- Ø **European developments**
- • **Council Recommendation for a gender balance in decision-making process**

The main legal instrument in the EU for a balanced participation of women and men in the decision-making process is the **Council Recommendation 96/694 of 2 December 1996** concerning the necessity of establishing an integrated action to fight unequal gender representation in the EU institutions and in every decision-making body and the invitation to establish an integrated and specific European strategy and a common approach to achieve such a result.

As far as progress made by Member States is concerned, the **European Commission** has established a report on 2000 on the situation in respect to the four priorities laid down in the Recommendation, which briefly, are:

ã Adoption of a comprehensive integrated strategy to promote a gender balanced participation in decision-making,

• Mobilising all the actors in economic and social life to achieve equal opportunities,

• Collection and publication of statistics on gender representation on decision-making,

• Promotion of a gender balance at all levels, in all areas.

The overall picture provided can only be considered as a starting point. In fact, not all Member States have been keen enough to provide information on the different priorities, which, in their turn, are not sufficiently precise for Member States to adopt a common set of measures. The four priorities need to be made more precise and compulsory with precise deadlines to be met. It is only through precise deadlines and benchmarks that it will be possible to identify Member States, which have not compelled to their obligations, to register global progress and to advance in gender balance.

As a conclusion, on the basis of the information supplied, the Council Recommendation has been partly implemented by the Member States; further efforts must be done towards a more comprehensive integrated strategy which still does not exist.

• • **The Women's Rights Committee Contribution**

The **Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities of the European Parliament**, that I have the honour to chair, is specifically concerned as regards the little emphasis placed by most Member States on the incorporation of a gender perspective in the political decision making.

• • **Towards the European Elections, in June 2004**

This year, in advance of the elections to the European Parliament 2004, my Committee as well as Commission have put the spotlight on women in decision-making and have concentrated its 2003 funding activities on the promotion of gender balance in decision-making, both in political and in economic life.

The Women's Committee has drawn up reports on the issue of women's **representation in decision-making**. In a resolution adopted in Plenary in the end of 2000, based on a report drafted by me, the promotion of women in decision-making is considered in the light of the implementation of the Council Regulation of 1996 on the same subject. In September 2002, our committee adopted unanimously an own-initiative report by Miet SMET (EPP-ED) on the representation of women in the social partners of the European Union. The report, which was adopted by Plenary in September 2002, calls for strategies to boost the role of women and encourage the social partners to devise affirmative action programmes and to draw up targets, with deadlines, to increase the representation of women both in their internal organisations and in the collective bargaining process and as such in decision making.

In view of the European elections in 2004, a Public Hearing "Elections 2004: How to ensure balanced representation of women and men" was held in June 2003 (Lone DYBKJAER, ELDR,) Rapporteur. Experts highlighted the need for a strategy ensuring gender balance on electoral lists and developing awareness-raising campaigns aiming at the advantages of parity democracy. An initiative report on the same subject is under elaboration, which will highlight the need for positive action measures, awareness raising and information campaigns, the specific needs in the Accession Countries and the possibility of legislative action and

increasing the pool of women candidates. The report is scheduled for adoption in the Committee in October 2003.

• • **The new Constitutional Treaty – Gender Equality, a value of the European Union**

The European Convention is a good illustration to assess the present situation on the weak representation of women in the political forums. "Building a democratic Europe – Women's Convention" was the theme of two public hearings we have had in our committee on 22 May and on 2 October 2002, along with two conferences of the Network of Parliamentary Committees for Equal Opportunities of the EU, in Copenhagen Nov. 2002 and in Athens March 2003.

The discussions were very contraceptive and useful, and participants shared a number of common aims and conclusions. In close contact and support from Parliamentarians in the EU and Candidate Countries, some women Members of the Convention, NGOs and the civil society, we have put forward a number of requests in order that the women's voices would be heard in the work of the Convention.

In the beginning of September 2003, our Committee has given its input (Lone DYBKJAER, ELDR,) to the Parliament report on the draft Constitution and opinion on the convocation of the Intergovernmental Conference IGC. The Committee emphasises that the Convention has completed its task and that gender equality is an integral part of the draft Constitutional Treaty that the principle of gender mainstreaming is rightly placed as an horizontal article III-1 and that the fight against all forms of discrimination, including sex-based discrimination, is also rightly inserted as an horizontal article III-1a; Welcomes that equality is part of the European Union's

values but emphasises that the gender composition of the Convention has been completely unacceptable: 17% women in a body of 105 members is far from enough to ensure a gender balance. Likewise, the composition of the Presidium consisting of 12 men and one woman was utterly unacceptable. It also regrets that gender equality and the fight against all forms of gender discrimination has not been inserted as a shared competence of the EU in the Draft Treaty on the European Constitution and also that the Convention did not incorporate an article in the institutional chapter requiring a balanced representation of women and men in EU institutions. Although each Member State shall present three candidates for the post of Commissioner, in which both genders have to be represented, there is still a long way to go. Our Committee also regrets that no legal basis has been approved to combat all forms of violence against women and children.

Parity in political life remains an issue at both Member State and European level. Despite the fact that in some **Member States** there is a trend towards the introduction of legislation on parity, the results of recent national elections have left mixed feelings i.e. in France the law on parity had no impact on balancing gender representation, in Portugal a slight improvement etc.

- Ø **Challenges to women's participation**
- · **Fundamental equality has not been achieved yet**

European women should consider themselves rather fortunate for living in this place of the world, where major developments have taken place over the last decades in connection with democratic rights and gender equality. Being quite optimistic, I would dare say that we are fortunate, not only for what has been achieved

up to date, but also for the prospects that Europe is giving for the future. There is no doubt that a great deal has been achieved so far within a very short time, which can allow us a little celebration. However, fundamental equality has not been achieved yet, since we are still poorer and with less power than men. Although growing numbers of women have attained high political office, a breakthrough is still a long way off. There remains a tendency still dominant, but not universal and slowly changing, for women to be given portfolios considered to be within women's realm – health, social security, etc. The proportion of women in the national parliaments of the EU varies considerably, from 9% in Greece to 47% in Sweden, while the average percentage of women in national Parliaments is of 22.5% and of 24.5% in Governments. The European Parliament is in the forefront with 31% women members, and it is interesting to note that the proportion of women in each political group varies greatly, the highest being in the Parliamentary Group of the Party of the European Socialists (PES), which consist of 37% women and 42% of the Bureau members.

It is worthwhile mentioning the considerable progress made in the 1990's by the European Union. From 1991 to 1999 the number of women increased from 19% to 31% in the European Parliament, from 10% to 25% in the European Commission, which today counts five women Commissioners, and from 11% to 23% in the Member States governments.

- • **A critical mass of women in decision making is urgently needed**

The increasing numbers of women within Parliament and particularly within the ranks of the government is to be welcomed. However, these figures should by no means reassure us. A vital issue is not only to increase the numbers of women in power, but to ensure that those

numbers reach a critical mass sufficient to ensure that a range of women's voices and experiences is heard. Moreover, achieving greater numbers alone is not sufficient, it is also necessary for a significant number of women to be in positions where they are able to make their views heard and have significant input. It is more difficult for women in relatively junior positions of power to challenge dominant views.

- • **Strong and inspirational women to demand their voices to be heard**

Women who achieve positions within decision making processes are so outnumbered that it is often politically very difficult for them to take a strong stand on particular issues, especially if that stand places them in opposition to their colleagues. There are many remarkable, strong, and inspirational women who were able to demand that their voices be heard, but there are also many equally impressive women who are simply overridden by the dominant discourse carried out by their male colleagues.

- • **Support networks can play a vital role**

It is also often the case that to achieve positions of power women must outperform their male colleagues, often adopting the dominant positions. My view is that for this situation to change, multi-pronged strategies are necessary. Education for girls and the position of women within society are fundamental, but we cannot wait until equal access to education for girls has been achieved in every country on the planet. This is where support networks – both informal and formal – can play a vital role. Yet it is important for such networks to move beyond established political parties into the community. The involvement of women in local level politics is also very important, providing an important

end in itself and also providing a training ground for women who move into national level politics.

- • **A fair share of family responsibilities and unpaid work**

The nature of the political system and the expectations of the ways in which parliamentarians work needs to be challenged. An issue that I would like to take this opportunity to raise relates to the preconceptions, and to some extent practical barriers, that continue to prevent women from achieving positions of power. While the argument that women are too busy within the family to engage in the "public sphere" is too often used to excuse the exclusion of women's involvement in the formal political processes. As they currently operate in the vast majority of countries it is often extremely difficult – if not impossible – for many women with family commitments to become involved. Sharing experience of how these processes can be reformed is vital.

- Ø **Conclusions**

- • **Great strides forward have been made; yet still we have too far to go**

We have come a long way and great strides forward have been made. The European Union framework and perspective certainly helped and was vital in focusing attention on the issue. Yet we still have far to go. I have found, however, that networks between women – sharing ideas, experiences – is vitally important. The women have a great deal to share their experience and learn from others about the participation and exclusion of women in decision making processes. We should not assume that gender necessarily provides a common political basis, but achieving greater gender equity will benefit all women and men.

- • **Gender equality high on the agenda of IGC**

We very much hope that gender equality will be placed high on the agenda during the IGC, otherwise women in all Member States are likely to look upon the result very sceptically. The draft Constitutional Treaty should not weaken the EU acquis on gender equality and it is very positive that is written in a gender neutral language. However, a European Constitutional Treaty, even with well-integrated gender equality provisions, is not sufficient to achieve gender equality. The Constitutional Treaty, along with other gender equality provisions, needs to be applied and become a reality in daily life.

- • **True equality means parity democracy**

Politics for women can only be achieved with women and solely with sufficient numbers of women. True equality means parity. This means much more than merely occupying half of the seats in Parliament; it means equal participation of women at leadership levels of economy, of education, in administration and in the media, in the trade unions, in the highest courts and so on.

However, our main aim should primarily concentrate on developing comprehensive binding legislation measures with specific obligations and clear targets which are essential to meet common standards in all Member states.

- • **Our vision for the 21st century. A new political culture**

We, European women, have the capacity to offer a message to the majority of citizens, and we claim that ultimately, we are in politics in order that people may live a bit better, have equality of opportunity and a sense of justice.

Under the circumstances, I feel that we are entitled to a women's vision for the politics of the 21st century: a vision for the world as a whole, according to which, by acquiring more political power, we will help construct a societal and political architecture where all people will be equally and fairly embraced. We want to create a Europe where human rights will be fully respected, where inequalities and discriminations based on religion, ethnic origin, gender and race are absent from every country, where poverty and all forms of violence are eliminated, where the massive resources used in actions of destruction are diverted to relieve the poor, promote education, improve health and housing conditions, protect environment, both human and physical, bring security, trust, love and prosperity in people's life.

Women, as a whole, are historically associated with non-violence; their value-system is associated with dialogue, compromise, reconciliation and settling-up of differences by peaceful means. This value-system can hopefully provide an alternative to the current culture of violence, whilst at the same time it can help the development of a new political culture, that of peace, co-operation and respect for differences.