

"EU AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS The Role of the European Parliament"

CEC & AUTH

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The Role of the European Parliament"

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Dear Friends, Honorable participants,

First and foremost I would like to congratulate the School of Theology of the AUTH and the CEC for organizing in common such events like this one, which develop and consolidate the dialogue for H. R.

It is a great honor and pleasure to speak before you today. Human rights and elimination of discrimination have always been among the major priorities of the European Union and, more particularly, of the European Parliament.

Let me give you a very brief historical evidence, which can help students understand better the present situation:

Human Rights and Gender Equality Policies are founded upon the ideas and the values of individual rights, freedom, democracy, equality, solidarity and social justice, developed in the 17th and 18th century, during the European Enlightenment. Christianity's core values for

justice, love, peace and solidarity have also contributed to change. However, at that time, women were left out of any rights. The French Revolution did not recognize any of the claims of women for gender justice. Those who dared to demand inclusion were beheaded (Olympe de Gouz).

The Church, as well, did not do anything to include women as equals. Regarding the Greek Orthodox Church, has never in history been supportive of gender equality, not even today, when gender equality has been universally recognized. This denotes a serious democratic deficit. It is a very sad truth.

It is thanks to the feminist movement, initiated during the 19th century and accelerated in the 20th, actually, thanks to an elite of educated and courageous women, that women became recipients of rights. The first claim was the right to education and secondly the right to a decent work. Civic and individual rights followed. Some of those demands, persisting until today, are carrying a big load of work to the European Parliament.

The European Community, since its founding Treaty of Rome, in 1957, with article 119A, "equal pay, for equal work", has put forward a broad and diverse EU policy to promote women's rights, in line with the UN framework. Professor Durham gave us a full account yesterday.

Gender equality became a basic value, upon which the EU was constructed and it is enshrined in the last Lisbon Treaty. EU is in a unique position to have its legislation, superseding national legislation (the principle of supremacy), thus being able to force its laws upon member states. This has been especially beneficial for women suffering from irrational discriminations, in countries like Greece.

However, while equal treatment has been firmly established in employment, which is the main interest of the EU, unequal treatment, outside the field of employment, continues to be neglected, at both European and national levels. When you see the family picture of the European leaders, you can see which gender is in power.

The EU legislation on gender equality can be found in the **"hard law"**, such as the treaties and EU regulations, directives and decisions, which are binding for all member states. Parts of the EU gender policy are also found in **"soft law"**, which includes EC recommendations, communications and action plans, or Council resolutions. Overall the EU gender regime, includes three dimensions: antidiscrimination law, positive action and gender mainstreaming in all policy areas.

On an EU level the European Parliament, has been the main defender of fundamental rights and gender equality. Being the only European institution of direct and democratic legitimacy, the European Parliament monitors the respect, observance and promotion of rights and freedoms, not just within the EU, but also beyond European borders.

The most visible demonstration of the Parliament's efforts, is the annually awarded «Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought», since 1988. Leyla Zana, a Kurdish MP, was awarded the Sakharov Prize in 1995, for her commitment to peace resolution of the Turkish/Kurdish conflict. Raif Badawi was the 2015 Laureate of the Sakharov Prize.

The activities of the European Parliament, its prizes, resolutions and reports serve to bring burning issues to light. It is thanks to these reports that "the voice" of the European Parliament has increasingly been taken into consideration.

However, on a legal basis, the Parliament doesn't actually have any real authority. Although it has received more responsibilities, thanks to the Lisbon Treaty, it has, in reality, no direct leverage in this area, particularly when it comes to legislation. Nevertheless, it decides in collaboration with the Council on the **community budget** and could thus directly influence EU policies. The program DAPHNE, to eliminate violence against women and children, gives an example of the EP role on the allocation of the Budget.

The EP parliamentary Committee on gender equality (FEMM), was established in 1979. On February 11, of 1981, a report of 181 pages and a resolution, adopted by the EP plenary, included a historical panorama of problems faced by women, since the industrial revolution. That report influenced the platform of the Community's gender equality policy for the following decades and nourished public discourse. Since its setting up the FEMM Committee, has produced a big load of reports, opinions, public hearings, studies, research and action plans. The FEMM has contributed to the adoption of the EU Roadmap and the Gender Pact, outlining priority areas for the period until 2020.

I had the privilege to be elected Chairperson of this Committee for the period 2002 – 2004, a very interesting period, when the debate on the future of Europe had started and a Convention was set up to discuss the Constitution of a United Europe. To give you an idea of the work of the EP, allow me to present a sample of my personal experience.

At that time, beginning of the 3d millennium, my efforts were directed to influence the process of constructing the future of Europe, in a way that gender equality would be enshrined in the

Constitution. It was with surprise and concern when we found out that in the preliminary draft Constitutional Treaty, on 28 October 2002, there was a complete lack of mentioning of gender issues. The response from the male-dominated Convention had been both disappointing and worrying. In this situation, our Committee felt that it should act strongly and immediately. We managed to mobilize all the interested organizations on European and on national level.

We have had a lot of support in contributions from organisations, such as the European Women's Lobby, the European Women Lawyers Association, legal experts of the Commission, researchers, the European Commission Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities and many others.

All voices had given the same message: gender equality must have a prominent place in the Convention on the Future of Europe. We prepared a declaration – extensively discussed and agreed by all Members – demanding that first and foremost, the "acquis communautaire" on gender policy, should be fully maintained and strengthened. Gender equality should be included among the **basic values** of the Union. Its promotion, as well as the elimination of inequalities, should be an objective and task of the Union.

In addition, the Charter of Fundamental Rights should be incorporated in such a way that its advantages on gender equality were preserved. Another important request of our Committee was that an appropriate legal basis in the Treaty should be necessary to fight all forms of violence against women. This still remains a demand. We had sent our concrete demands to the president Giscard d'Estaing, with copies to all Members of the Convention.

The efforts for a EU Constitution, as you know have failed. However, the Lisbon Treaty includes many of the provisions, prepared for the Constitution, and of course our main requests are included. On the Union policies, EP demands that Gender mainstreaming should be incorporated in all policy areas, at all levels, at all stages and by all participants in political activity.

Another form of violence of rights, which is of growing concern, is trafficking in women and the increasing number of victims. We at the E.P. had early enough drawn attention to the process which implies rising levels of abusive and irregular situations for thousands of women refugees and migrants. Among them trafficking, which usually implies prostitution of women and girls, as it is the case nowadays.

Against this same background, the EP has proposed tough measures against female genital mutilation and forced marriages, and denounces the brutality of this so-called "traditional practices". Personally, I have many times stated that I have no respect for cultures, which do not respect human rights.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights, is another very important issue for the EP and the relevant reports are drafted within the international legal and political framework on contraception, abortion and adolescent sexual and reproductive health/sexuality education.

The FEMM is also very active in foreign missions. The most memorable event, from my term in EP, was the mission to Afghanistan, in November 2002, a year after the fall of the Taliban regime. The journey was indeed long, full of adventure and full of knowledge, just like the Greek poet Cavafis would say. It was risky, too.

We were a small group of 6 courageous women MEPs. The first EP mission to go there. For an entire week, we stayed in the country that had so much troubled the entire world. Our objective was clear: express our support and solidarity to the Afghan women and secure that the country is being rebuilt in a way that takes care of the rights and advancement of women's position.

It was a tremendous political experience. We met with the President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, with the former King and Father of the Nation, Zahir Shah, almost all the ministers, as well as with Dr Sima Samar, President of the Committee for Human Rights and with several NGOs, too.

We visited areas where EU projects were implemented, in Kabul and also in the countryside. We travelled to Bamyan, 250 km north-west of Kabul, where the Taliban had destroyed the sculptures of Buddha. It took us 15 hours to arrive there after riding a harsh road and crossing minefields! In Bamyan we met with the mayor of the town and the forum of women organizations, realizing that this was the first opportunity these women ever had to speak in public and meet with women of another culture. At any rate, our journey was exciting, constructive and effective. One day after our visit 20 women, who had been convicted of adultery, were liberated from jail. Nevertheless, until today not much has changed for women in Afghanistan.

The FEMM Committee routinely passes resolutions that call upon institutions and governments, on a global scale, to take immediate measures, so that violations of rights can be brought to an end. In addition, the Parliament publishes an annual report that gives an account of the current global state of Human Rights; The reactions of some governments

would suggest that they are not indifferent to the criticisms and recommendations. Such a case was the resolution on lifting of the ban on women entering Mount Athos, the all male monastic community, near Thessaloniki.

I have advocated the lifting of the ban on women. This ban started a thousand years ago, during the dark ages in Europe, and reflects the social conditions of that era, when women did not have any access, neither to education, nor to the arts, science or public life. Today, this decision can no longer be operative, since it clashes not only with the currently prevailing perception of human rights, but also with the hard core of Christian religion and faith itself.

It is important to remember the amazing Christian message that condemns all discrimination on the basis of national, or social origin, as well as of gender: «**There can be neither Jew, nor Greek, neither slave, nor free, neither male, nor female**». I would like to see this implemented, in my country, both, by allowing ordination of women and lifting the ban of women on Athos. At least, the Church should allow to start the dialogue upon these issues, with open hearts and unprejudiced minds. The Orthodox Church, by adopting a positive stance towards women's rights, can only reap great benefits for Christian faith.