

ECOSY, The Left and Feminism- Conquest of New Rights for Everybody (στα αγγλικά)

ECOSY Women Seminar Promoting Gender Equality in Europe

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MEP, President of the E. P. Committee on
Women's Rights & Equal Opportunities

It is a great pleasure and a great honour to be invited by ECOSY to present "Left and Feminism: Conquests of New Rights for Everybody". This issue can only be addressed in the historical context of the women's movement evolution.

The birth of feminism in the 19th century came to the right time to develop. During the 19th century, nations were going through radical changes and societies were adopting new ways of life, influenced mainly by two ideologies: conservatism and socialism.

Feminism, was unsuccessful in conservative countries, since conservatives liked to preserve the existing order, having great respect for traditions, and inheritance left behind. Feminism, made them the enemy, since they were trying to preserve the very structure that had placed women in the traditional roles. Feminism wanted radical changes and equal rights of women and men to match the progress going on in the world.

Religion was another factor creating great difficulties for feminism in conservative societies. The tradition of the church has always placed women in the role of care taker. Women were meant to be at home, and their main role was to give birth to children and take care of them.

On the other hand, the socialist movement was playing significant part in the social demands for equality and justice. However, according to the socialist theory, the critical division of the society is the class division and all the rest is considered to be secondary or a question of individual conscience. As a consequence, any discussion on gender was seen as a threat to the unity of the Party and as disorientation from the main enemy, capitalism. Marxists, unfortunately, were unable to consider issues of sex or race as having the same weight or importance as class differences. It was assumed that with the creation of socialist structures, sexism will wither away. Of course this has not been the case...

The socialist understanding of the gender issue was based mainly on Engels "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State". He argued that the oppression of women is not universal; women are strong and equal in societies with no class divisions. For this reason, the Women's Question could have been dealt with exclusively within the socialist society and it is the women's duty to fight against capitalism. For the theoreticians of socialism women's freedom was considered as a goal or a natural consequence of socialism.

In fact, the gender oppression has been excluded from the socialist thought and initially the women's status, was discarded. Equality was the battle cry for both feminists and socialists, however, they were fighting different wars. The socialist's was a battle against the differences between the classes, the feminist's

was a battle against the differences between sexes.

The creation of a new middle class in Britain, was one of the factors that triggered the feminist movement in the 19th century. The women, part of this middle class, had the time and the necessary education to advocate for gender equality, giving the Women's Movement a great lift. As Catharine Mackinnon puts it, under socialism "women became as free as men to work outside the home while men remained free from work within it"

Women's Socialist International covered any voids in the socialist theory and practice, by adding a critique of the domination of men over women to the existing theory of the domination of capital over labour.

However, modern European left and social democratic parties with their emphasis on social and economic justice, equality of opportunity and respect of individual and human rights, function amicably with feminist theory.

Following decisions taken by unanimity by the Socialist International and the European Socialist Party, steps have been taken to adopt decisions emphasizing the need to enrich the political and economic issues from a women's perspective and they have set an objective for gender balance in the decision making process. Several parties of the European left have already reached this aim.

Regarding the quotas strategy, one has to admit that its demand is a question of social justice. As long as there is no political balance between women and men, the implementation of quota within parties must be emphasized and gender balance must also be promoted through appropriate legislation, to overcome the historical exclusion of women from the public

sphere. Particular attention in relation to quotas should be paid to the situation of women in youth organizations, which should give to young women a chance to participate effectively in political life.

New strategies for equality

Therefore, what should be done, to break the circle of stereotypes and social biases? Some years ago, we thought that the conquest of economic independence and equal wage was sufficient enough to gain equality. Experience showed in practice that the roots of rights violation were so much deep and problems so much complicated that we need to revise globally our strategies.

Against new tendencies, which reject ideologies, European socialist parties have to respond with stronger and clear political signals. The ideological dimension of gender equality and our claim for a respect of human rights have to be defined as the main orientations to gain full equality. Socialist movements need to adopt gender equality as ruling part of their ideology, their policy-making and their daily practice.

At the same time, we need to establish a new, modern and more functioning political model, that will take into consideration the perceptions and the needs of women, while strengthening our parties internal democracy and social dialogue.

On the debate for the Future of Europe and the reform of the treaties, which has already started, women's organisations have already expressed the view that gender awareness has to be built into the work of the Convention.

Equality between women and men – gender equality – is a fundamental pre-condition for

achieving real democracy. This basic principle must be enshrined in the future Treaty.

> It is necessary to constitutionalise the gender equality policy by granting the Community a specific title, which gives it the competence to achieve in practice a true equality between women and men. First, a policy for gender equality should provide the legal instruments, actions and programmes to accomplish the aims of the Community laid down in article 2 (to promote...equality between men and women...) Secondly, a specific chapter on gender equality should be introduced in the Treaty. Such an inclusion would constitute an important step forward, as today no Treaty provision establishes means to promote gender equality fully, besides the part which refers to employment and occupation.

> Discrimination owing to one's sex should be prohibited and eliminated immediately, in the same way as discrimination on the basis of nationality is prohibited today (article 12 of the Treaty).

> The Charter of Fundamental Rights must be incorporated into the future Treaty and must be legally binding. The Charter should be strengthened by the introduction of specific measures, particularly concerning prohibition of all sorts of violence against women – including domestic violence, trafficking in women, sexual exploitation etc – respect for women's rights with regard to health, sexuality and procreation, and the rights of both women and men to combine private and professional life.

> The introduction of a new measure in the Treaty stating that a balanced participation of women and men in decision-taking at all levels should be obligator, as concerns the composition of the assemblies, bodies and institutions of the Union. Companies should be

encouraged to apply the same equality principle in their decision-making process.

> The inclusion of the gender dimension in article 3.2 TEC aims at incorporating gender equality into all policies. This provision on "gender mainstreaming" must include the obligation for the Union and its Member States to analyse the sex-specific consequences of all policy measures, at all stages of the decision-making process, in order that necessary modifications of the policies can be undertaken. Furthermore, gender mainstreaming should not remain as limited in scope as is the case today, but should be extended to cover all areas for which the Union is competent (including Common Foreign and Security Policy, police and judicial cooperation).

> The anti-discrimination clause (article 13) should be strengthened and decisions taken in the framework of this clause should be taken by qualified majority in the Council of Ministers, in co-decision with the European Parliament.

> Budgets and budgetary decisions have a different impact on lives of women and men. It is necessary to include a gender perspective in the budgetary procedure so that budgets may be adapted and contribute to equality between women and men. This would necessitate a political commitment.

> Gender equality must be a driving force in defining the external policies of the Union. The role and visibility of women in the Union's external relations must be reinforced. Equality objectives must be fully integrated into the definition, implementation and evaluation of the external policies of the Union, including macro-economic and external trade policies, development aid policies, programmes fighting poverty, as well as foreign and security policy.

> The principle of a balanced representation of sexes should be applied to the members of the Youth Convention scheduled for next July.

> Care must be taken to use a gender-neutral language in all texts of the Convention and of the new Treaty.

I hope we can share views with ECOSY and agree on how to create a platform of minimal demands on gender issues, as a common basis for further debate.