

Women and political decision-making

Online discussion report



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This publication summarises the views expressed by 33 people participating in an online discussion held on 30 September and 1 October 2013 through the EuroGender online platform (<http://eurogender.eige.europa.eu/>). This report was published in the framework of the 'Animation online discussions within EuroGender' EIGE/2012/OPER/23 service contract, delivered by Cultura Lavoro srl in partnership with the European Service Network (ESN). The findings, interpretations and conclusions are entirely those of the authors and should not be attributed in any manner to EIGE. Neither EIGE nor any person acting on its behalf may be held responsible for the content of the information contained in this publication.

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Introduction

The online discussion on 'Women in political decision-making' took place on 30 September and 1 October 2013. It was organised in the context of the forthcoming elections for the European Parliament in 2014 and in the light of the commitments from a broad range of European Union-level institutions and stakeholders to promote the issue of women in political decision-making over this key period for EU democracy.

The online discussion sought to:

- highlight and examine the gender balance in political decision-making;
- map the barriers to equal political representation of women and men;
- identify and explore strategies to enhance the equal political representation of women and men at all levels.

This report aims to enable a broad dissemination of the insights and learning from the online discussion. It seeks to both serve as a resource and act as an incentive for those who wish to maximise the participation of women in political decision-making over the coming period.

This report summarises the key points made and themes explored during the discussion. Inevitably, given the breadth and scale of the debate, it is impossible to fully reflect the detail of all of the ideas and perspectives brought forward.

Organisation

The online discussion was developed in four separate sessions over 2 days. Each session explored a specific topic, although the four topics selected were interconnected. The sessions were as follows:

- Session 1: Valuing gender equality and democracy. This session examined the current situation of women's participation in political decision-making. It discussed the arguments for greater equality between women and men in political representation and how best to communicate these arguments.
- Session 2: Women staking a claim. This session discussed the supply-side barriers that stop women deciding to come forward to participate in political decision-making. It examined strategies that enable women to come forward.
- Session 3: Opening up political systems. This session discussed the demand-side barriers that block women who are seeking to participate in political decision-making from advancing their political careers. It examined strategies that address these barriers.
- Session 4: Building for the future. This session explored current opportunities for change and how best to take advantage of these. It included a particular focus on the contribution that quotas can make to achieving gender-balanced political representation at all levels.



Participation

A total of 33 people contributed over the 2 days of the online discussion and a wider group of 105 active users participated. Participants were drawn from academia, civil society, the public sector, expert networks and the organising institutions. Participants came from 15 different Member States and Tunisia. Overall, about 217 contributions were made during the four sessions. The discussion was conducted in English.

The online discussion included the participation of three Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). There was a specific online exchange with Sirpa Pietikäinen, an MEP from Finland, at the end of the first day. She was the rapporteur for the 2012 European Parliament 'Report on women in political decision-making — quality and equality' (A7-0029/2012). Marusya Lyubcheva, an MEP from Bulgaria, participated in the debate during the third session of the online discussion. Claudette Abela Baldacchino, an MEP from Malta, made a contribution to the fourth and final session of the online discussion.

Background

The **Gender Equality Index** (<http://eige.europa.eu/content/gender-equality-index>) of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) combines gender indicators into a single summary measure examining progress made on gender equality. Six core dimensions are assessed — work, money, knowledge, time, power and health. The lowest score recorded was in the area of power in decision-making. A score of just 38 was recorded at EU level — well below the halfway mark for gender equality.

With elections for the European Parliament, 2014 will be an important year for politics and for women in politics in the EU; currently less than 35 % of the members of the European Parliament are women and only three of the vice-presidents of the European Parliament are women.

The European Parliament adopted the **'Report on women in political decision-making — quality and equality'** (<http://eurogender.eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/getDoc%20%281%29.pdf>) (2011/2295(INI)) in 2012. In this report, the European Parliament invited the Council, the Commission and the Member States to design and implement effective gender equality policies and multifaceted strategies to achieve parity in participation in political decision-making and leadership at all levels.

Equality in decision-making is one of the priority areas for action in the **'Strategy for equality between women and men 2010–15'** (<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:0491:FIN:en:PDF>) of the European Commission. The strategy points out that despite progress towards gender balance in political decision-making, only one out of four members of national parliaments and ministers of national governments is a woman. It commits, among other actions, to supporting efforts to promote greater participation by women in the European Parliament elections, including as candidates.

The 20th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action adopted by the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women will be marked in 2015. The Beijing Platform for Action identifies inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels as one of the critical areas of concern. Strategic objective G1 is to 'take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making'. Strategic objective G2 is to 'increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership'.

The scale of gender inequality in political decision-making established by the EIGE Gender Equality Index highlights the importance of this online discussion. The commitments evident at EU and United Nations levels to gender balance in political representation offer some optimism that change is possible. The forthcoming elections to the European Parliament suggest that this is a timely moment to be debating how best to make progress on this issue.



Summary

Session 1: Valuing gender equality and democracy

Introduction

Women make up a majority of the EU population, at 52 %. However, women only account for 35 % of the members of the European Parliament. Progress in advancing the participation of women in political decision-making at EU and Member State levels appears to have stalled in recent years and progress is uneven across the Member States. On average, the gender balance in national parliaments remains 24 % women and 76 % men.

Guiding questions

The debate examined the current situation for women in political decision-making and explored the arguments that could most effectively be made for change. The key guiding questions were as follows:

- *What is the situation in relation to women's participation in political decision-making in the different Member States?*
- *Why does the unbalanced representation of women matter?*
- *What are the advantages of increasing the numbers of women in political decision-making?*
- *Are there pitfalls in the arguments for change that we need to watch out for?*

Main conclusions

There are significant inequalities, across the EU, for women in political decision-making. Progress towards equality is slow and there is some evidence that progress already made is being reversed in some Member States. Issues of backlash against women coming forward in the political arena were identified.

The arguments for change towards greater equality have to be pragmatic. There is a broad justice-based argument for gender balance in political representation and a strong argument for change based on improving the quality and nature of our democracy. Political parties must be a key audience for these arguments. The case for equality between women and men in political decision-making needs to be tailored to this audience and should emphasise the gains for political parties from gender equality, including access to the full range of talents available and the potential for attracting a wider voter base. Young women should be identified as another key audience in making arguments for gender equality and a particular case for change needs to be made to mobilise their engagement with these issues.

Arguments for gender equality in political decision-making that are based on supposed characteristics of women or on a narrow definition of interests can be problematic. These arguments were criticised for having the potential to take an essentialist view of women, to be elitist and to isolate women within a narrow interest base.

Session 2: Women staking a claim

Introduction

Women face barriers that block them from deciding to seek political decision-making positions. Women may even decide that a political career is not feasible because of these barriers. These are the so-called supply-side barriers.

Guiding questions

The debate focused on supply-side barriers and on actions to address these. The key guiding questions were as follows:

- *What are the barriers that stop women from deciding to seek political decision-making positions?*
- *What cultural, economic or personal issues can be identified?*
- *What actions have demonstrated an ability to overcome these barriers?*
- *What new types of initiatives are needed to overcome these barriers?*



Main conclusions

The financial crisis has a key overarching impact on the participation of women in political decision-making. The image of politics generally is diminished and politics has become a less attractive arena for participation.

There are significant supply-side barriers of a cultural nature. Stereotypes of women, the gendered understanding of roles for women and the pressures that arise from these issues negatively shape decision-making by women in relation to their participation in politics. These cultural barriers in turn contribute to further practical barriers to making such a decision.

There is a lack of support for reconciliation of work and family life. It can be difficult for women, who bear an unequal share of caring responsibilities, to find time to launch a political career. Women do not have access to the economic resources and the networks that are required to engage in politics. Women can also face barriers of low self-confidence and low self-esteem in deciding whether or not to enter politics.

There are also barriers in relation to the practice of political parties. Political parties often fail to present role models for women. They can ghettoise women into particular policy areas and roles. This fails to attract participation by women.

One proposal made on a number of occasions was that standards be established for political parties. The emergence of new role models for women within politics could be encouraged, celebrated and highlighted.

Civil society campaigns could be stimulated and supported. These organisations have a key contribution to make in campaigning for a new awareness of gender inequalities in political decision-making and for a commitment to advance women within it.

Cultural change should be promoted. Education has a key role to play in achieving cultural change. It was also suggested that a new type of politics might need to emerge. This would be a politics that is based on equality and organised in a manner to achieve equality.

Session 3: Opening up political systems

Introduction

Women who have decided to participate in political decision-making face barriers in trying to pursue that decision and build a political career. These are the so-called demand-side barriers.

Guiding questions

The debate focused on demand-side barriers and on actions to address these. The key guiding questions were as follows:

- *What are the barriers faced by women seeking to participate in political decision-making?*
- *What cultural issues, issues of discrimination or issues of policy, procedure or practice can be identified?*
- *What actions have demonstrated an ability to overcome these barriers?*
- *What new initiatives are needed to overcome these barriers?*

Main conclusions

A framework of demand-side barriers was identified. There are barriers presented by political parties. These barriers are particularly present in relation to the political parties' processes for candidate selection and to where they place women on their electoral lists.

There are demand-side barriers within democratic institutions. These institutions can fail to take account of and respond to the needs of members with caring responsibilities. Childcare provision and arrangements to reconcile work and family life can be absent.

Political processes can present demand-side barriers. It is clear, for example, that some electoral systems enable gender equality and others limit the advancement of gender equality. Finally, the media can contribute to demand-side barriers through its coverage or lack of coverage of the issues for women in political decision-making.

Education again emerged as a key focus for proposals for change. Education could play a role in dismantling these demand-side barriers. Awareness campaigns are an important means of education on these matters.

The rules and procedures of political parties need to be a focus for change, in particular in relation to candidate selection.



Quotas were also proposed as having a key role to play in securing new access for women to political decision-making and dismantling demand-side barriers.

Session 4: Building for the future

Introduction

Quotas can achieve change as they compensate for the barriers women face. They can compel action to seek out active and competent women candidates and accelerate the slow pace of change. However, quotas can be controversial. They have been challenged as disregarding merit and as being discriminatory and undemocratic.

Elections to the European Parliament in 2014 could offer an opportunity to increase the numbers of women in political decision-making. The European institutions have expressed commitments towards this goal. The European Parliament invited the Council, the Commission and the Member States to implement policies and strategies to achieve parity in participation in political decision-making. The European Commission is committed to supporting efforts to promote greater participation of women in the European Parliament elections.

Civil society organisations are campaigning on the issue. The European Women's Lobby is running an EU-wide '50/50' campaign to promote the equal participation of women and men in all European institutions. The Mediterranean Institute for Gender Studies (MIGS) is coordinating national-level campaigns to promote gender equality in political decision-making.

The elections, the commitments made and the campaigns being run provided a moment of potential within which to promote and implement new policies and programmes to enhance the participation of women in political decision-making.

Guiding questions

The debate focused on quotas and on current opportunities to enable progress for women in political decision-making. The key guiding questions were as follows:

- *Do quotas have a role to play?*
- *Are there ways of addressing the issues that can make quotas unpopular?*
- *Are the 2014 elections to the European Parliament an opportunity for change?*
- *Are there other immediate opportunities we should be focusing attention on?*

Main conclusions

The European Parliament elections present an important opportunity for change for greater equality in political representation. This opportunity needs to be seized both in terms of achieving an increased presence of women in political decision-making and in terms of ensuring that new agendas for gender equality emerge from the European Parliament as a result of the forthcoming elections.

Civil society campaigns are important in achieving this change. Women's associations need to be supported in this work. These organisations are well placed to highlight the evidence of current inequalities, to make the arguments for change and to promote the new policies, programmes and practices required to advance the number of women in political decision-making.

Experts' contributions and key issues

Session 1: Valuing gender equality and democracy

The situation

The session started with an exchange about the current situation across the Member States. It was clear from all contributions that gender inequality in political decision-making remains problematic in many Member States.



Progress was reported in Italy.

“*After the last election of 2013, women’s representation in the Italian Parliament is 32 % in the House and 29 % in the Senate ... in the last political elections held in 2008 fewer than 20 % women were elected and in 2001 only slightly more than 11 %.*’ Emma Pietrafesa

Participation levels for women of as low as 11 % were reported and, in most instances, any progress reported was slow.

“*We had local elections this May (in Croatia) and achieved a 1 % increase in women’s representation at the local level, so, on average, women’s representation at the local level is 18. %. Progress is very slow.*’ Ina Volmut

This slow progress is, or is in danger of, being reversed in some instances.

“*In Cyprus women are seriously under-represented. Only 13 % of the Members of Parliament are women ... there was a backlash in the representation of women ... we had more women Members of Parliament in 2006.*’ Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies

“*After the election of 2010 (in the Czech Republic) an all-time high of women MPs was elected (22 %) ... With respect to the appearance of the ballots for the October elections it seems the proportion of women in the Chamber of Deputies will decrease again.*’ Veronika Šprincová and Marcela Adamusová, Forum 50 % from the Czech Republic

The language of backlash was evident in a number of contributions and this has been visible in the experiences of women candidates and politicians.

“*In the municipal election campaign this September, a women candidate was attacked by her political opponents ... They started to use her pictures (from Facebook) to construct her persona as sexual, youthful and irresponsible ... She was victimised because she decided to pursue a political career.*’ Barbara from Hungary

“*One of the things that happens is the discrediting of women politicians with details from their personal lives (true or invented). Some years ago the Minister for Internal Affairs (in Slovenia) was a successful and ambitious woman ... People started to question why she wasn’t married and why she didn’t have children.*’ Nina Sirk

Declaring oneself a feminist is difficult for politicians in circumstances of backlash.

“*Only one woman parliamentarian (in Romania) declares herself a feminist.*’ Irina Costache

The economic and financial crisis loomed in the background to the debate and could be one stimulus for this backlash.

“*The current economic crisis may have a negative impact on the possibility to have women in the upcoming elections to the parliament, and, in general, to foster more favourable conditions for women’s participation, as well as to have women’s concerns voiced through the election.*’ Claudia Padovani

The arguments

A challenge was posed to only using the presence and participation of women in political decision-making as the measure of success.

“*There are more women involved in politics now than in the 1990s decade. But is this progress? Are women better represented just because there are more women parliamentarians? Tough question.*’ Irina Costache

A range of arguments for gender equality in political representation were put forward in terms of improving democracy and the quality of governance.

“*It is a waste of talent that leads to a democracy deficit.*’ Sandor Kaszas in Hungary

“*Democracy without women (or gender equality in general) is not real democracy.*’ Veronika Šprincová and Marcela Adamusová, Forum 50% from Czech Republic

“*If a significant section of the population is not included in important areas of policymaking and decision-making for reasons other than ability, it is possible we are not being governed by the most talented of our citizens. There are particular needs, interests and concerns that arise from women’s experience and these will be inadequately addressed in a politics that is dominated by men.*’ Barbara from Hungary



Political parties were predictably identified as key actors and a key audience with whom to make the argument for gender equality. The argument, however, needs to be tailored to this specific audience.

“ *‘Winning is what influences political parties. If by encouraging women and helping them to be elected, parties believed they would benefit, they will act.’* ALDE Gender Equality Network

“ *‘It seems essential to use pragmatic (as well as normative) arguments ... better PR and bigger support from the voters ... In some cases it is possible to appeal to party ideology and principles and it’s always useful to use the language of the party.’* Veronika Sprinkova and Marcela Adamusová, Forum 50 % from Czech Republic

“ *‘The arguments to convince political parties to take this issue on could be that gender balance in politics improves the quality of policymaking and leads to the allocation of public resources in a manner that responds to the needs of both women and men. Parties are not fully inclusive of the opinions and perspectives of the population they represent unless women are equally represented. Also we have to convince parties of the public demand for parity democracy.’* Mediterranean Institute for Gender Studies

Member of the general public, therefore, must also form a key audience with whom to make the argument for gender equality in political decision-making if they are, in turn, to influence the political parties.

Women were seen as an important audience with whom to make the case for gender equality in political decision-making. There was a particular emphasis on young women in this regard.

“ *‘Young people (not only girls) today are generally not interested in politics at all, because just too often their opinion doesn’t matter or they don’t want to be part of political elites to participate ... something has to change in politics itself.’* Nina Sirk

“ *‘There is a need to inspire, facilitate and encourage female participation in political and decision-making processes from very early on ... without high school encouragement and facilitation our case will be lost in the longer perspective ... This requires educational measures and ... some age quotas enabling young women to enter the process without the usual obstacles.’* Agata Czarnacka

The tensions

There are tensions in building the argument for equality in relation to participation of women in political decision-making. Should this be framed in terms of a politics of ideas — where all perspectives and opinions among the citizens must be articulated – or in terms of a politics of presence — where proportionate representation is required if the institution is to be democratic? A politics of presence dominated many of the arguments put forward.

“ *‘Women want to make sure that their concerns will be represented ... The main question is what is being represented and it is followed by the question of whether or not it matters who our representatives are. So we deal with two aspects or goals: the representation of interests and the representation of people.’* Sandor Kaszas from Hungary

“ *‘It is essential to distinguish two levels ... First, the number of women in politics, where the justice argument is relevant ... Second, the content of politics ... of course women, as a group, have a different life experience, but it’s not right to presume that women will represent party interests as well as some gender-related interests ... We have no such expectations of men politicians.’* Veronika Šprincová and Marcela Adamusová, Forum 50 % from Czech Republic

Another tension arises when arguments for gender equality are made in relation to particular characteristics that women might bring to the political process.

“ *‘Women are known to work cooperatively, to look for the best solution to a problem. We need that today more than ever.’* ALDE Gender Equality Network

There are pitfalls of some form of essentialism in such arguments.

“ *‘The argument of justice is enough when talking about gender equality in decision-making. Appealing on the basis of some “women’s” characteristics lacking in current politics is always tricky.’* Veronika Šprincová and Marcela Adamusová, Forum 50 % from Czech Republic



Arguments based on women representing a single set of interests were challenged as being inadequate and elitist.

“*The assumption that women have a shared set of interests has been the subject of much controversy. One powerful criticism against it is that it seems to reduce all women to a common essence, thus obscuring differences among women. It also seems to suggest that women’s interests are “frozen” in time.*’ Barbara from Hungary

“*For far too long “women’s issues” have dominated our discussions and frankly have resulted in us being seen as merely interested in reproductive health rather than the whole spectrum of issues. This has resulted in women not being taken seriously in many areas of political life ... it means we have to establish women as a credible political voice.*’ ALDE Gender Equality Network

There was, however, a strong concern to retain the notion of group and the shared interests and solidarity among women implied in this.

“*It is not questionable that women have specific interests that require representation. There are two problems with this: the presumption that one group is associated with an interest may lead to the exclusion of other people, and the belief that women make up a unified group who share an interest ... the category of women is very problematic but, on the other hand, it seems we are in desperate need of reinventing this category.*’ Veronika Bartha Toth from Hungary

Session 2: Women staking a claim

Sirpa Petikainen MEP from Finland responded to a series of questions as part of this session. She argued for more women in politics as ‘more women in politics diversifies politics. The more diverse the group of decision makers, the more diverse and better are the outcomes’ and ‘experience shows that in those countries where we have more women in political decision-making we have better welfare societies. That is essential for the people and for political stability.’

She noted the barriers faced by women seeking political participation in that ‘the biggest is the attitudes and structures that exclude women in political parties, electoral lists and political group decisions. We need parity rules and regulations to overcome it.’ When asked about quotas, she was supportive: ‘We need binding measures. As I already mentioned, gender equality does not happen passively. We need active measures. According to some calculations it will take until 2060 to achieve gender parity without binding measures.’

Looking at the broader future and the post-2015 development agenda, she emphasised the issues of ‘sexual and reproductive rights ... young married girls and mothers that don’t have careers ... the need to end child marriages ... to educate girls and women for free ... and ensure property rights.’

The barriers

This session examined the so-called supply-side barriers to women making the decision to get involved in politics and political decision-making. Six sets of barriers were identified and discussed in the debate — culture and stereotypes, self-confidence, reconciliation of family and work, access to resources, the behaviour of political parties’ and the economic and financial crisis.

Culture was seen as a key issue and, in particular, the manner in which women and men are socialised into roles in society and the way in which stereotypes contribute to this. This socialisation affects values held and attitudes of and role definition for women and impacts on their decisions about participating in politics.

“*Women do not belong in politics because it doesn’t fit into the image we are raised to have raised about women’s place in society.*’ Irina Costache

“*Women are socialised into thinking that competitiveness and political ambition are unfeminine traits. Women will be reluctant to enter the world of politics as this will be perceived by them as a “man’s world” — a world involving a job which is socially unacceptable for them and one for which they lack the abilities to become capable actors.*’ Veronika Bartha Toth

“*Women in the eligibility pool who have traditional family structures or who hold traditional attitudes toward gender roles will express less ambition to run for office than similarly situated men.*’ Sandor Kaszas

“*Women, despite having political talent and potential, start to believe the story told by men. They start to behave as men expect them to behave ... they internalise the patriarchal discourse.*’ Barbara



These cultural processes do not result in a disinterest in politics but create difficulties for participation.

“ *The fact that women organise and are very active in civil society shows that the hypothesis about their lack of interest in political participation is false. Women want to participate, but it is very difficult for them to negotiate the world of male politics.*’ Barbara

These cultural processes do impact on the self-confidence and self-esteem of many women. This impacts on decisions they might make with regard to politics.

“ *I tried to run for an office at municipal level. I was surprised to discover how many issues I was confronted with by myself. The internal censorship caused self-inhibition and lack of confidence, interest and motivation.*’ Veronika Bartha Toth

Cultural processes take very concrete forms in the roles played by men and women. As a result, the unequal sharing of care and household responsibilities presents significant barriers.

“ *One of the biggest obstacles to women’s political participation is reconciliation of work and private and family life ... a better sharing of family and other private responsibilities would definitely help.*’ Pavla Špondrová

Cultural barriers also become more concrete in relation to women’s access to the resources and networks required for a successful career.

“ *Access to resources is what makes the difference between a winner politician and just a party member ... Resources refer to ability to raise funds via personal contacts, access to information, and the possibility to socialise in certain contexts.*’ Irina Costache

“ *Women are not always in a position to make the decisions on behalf of the household to invest money in their own political career.*’ Barbara

Political parties reflect and propagate the values and stereotypes that put boundaries on women deciding to enter politics. This can take very extreme forms.

“ *The image of women in politics is connected to the image of showgirls, in Italy, a cause for a series of political scandals in some political parties ... Most people think that women involved in politics do not rise to high levels on the basis of experience and skills.*’ Francesca Ragno

“ *It is not in every country that the political culture enables younger women to speak up and show themselves with a certain security that they will not be regarded as sexual objects — that they have not gained their positions with their bodies.*’ Agata Czarnacka

The supply-side barriers posed by political parties extend beyond image to the positioning of women within political parties.

“ *Many women politicians are complaining that they are ghettoised within their parties to deal with women’s issues.*’ Irina Costache

Finally, the financial crisis has resulted in a popular opinions about politics becoming more negative. This presents further barriers to participation and even suggests the need for new forms of politics.

“ *There is the barrier of politics itself being a discredited field. In the past years generations and numerous social categories have lost their trust in representative democracies and their arsenal of career politicians, voting system and political parties. Hopefully there are some women out there working on a different kind of politics.*’ Irina Costache

The actions

“ *Actions to address these supply-side barriers need to be comprehensive in encompassing all these different barriers if they are to be effective. It is crucial to elaborate a comprehensive strategy integrating different levels and different factors that come into play. It is important to design awareness and education campaigns ... to have an empowered women’s sector in civil society ... providing expertise and support ... and to achieve a successful mobilisation of women in civil society.*’ Barbara

Actions to address these barriers have included awareness-raising campaigns to promote greater participation of women, mentoring women to encourage them to enter politics, training and networking programmes to support women, and the establishment of foundations to finance women’s electoral campaigns.



There was an emphasis on the importance of action by political parties in removing these barriers.

“ *‘It would be good for all political parties to agree that this is important and to work together to achieve it. An example of this was the 300 Group in the UK, where women and men of the main parties trained potential women candidates without party bias. It did some good work.’* ALDE Gender Equality Network

Standards were suggested as a key tool for change in political parties.

“ *‘What about a kind of ‘Official EU standards for political parties.’* Pavla Špondrová

Session 3: Opening up political systems

Marusya Lyubcheva, MEP from Bulgaria, joined the debate during this session. She stated that ‘in my experience the main challenges, or so to say “barriers”, to opening up political systems lie within the current social structures and within the way women evaluate their roles’. She spoke of the challenge of stereotypes, the underestimation of the impact of stereotypes, low self-esteem and the lack of self-confidence.

She also highlighted demand-side barriers. ‘The hardest part was the incomprehension among the high-level political circles of what I do and why I’m doing it. Formally we are all for equality and gender mainstreaming, but in fact men always managed to have the dominant position when it comes to policymaking. As if solidarity between men was stronger than solidarity between women.’

She identified solidarity among women as one source for change. ‘It is also important for women who have succeeded in politics, business and the academic sphere to support this process, to be active in the field of gender equality’. Education was another source for change. ‘What we need now is to focus on education, and even education of the society, to change the dominant mentality, to explain that men and women are not only equal partners in life, but also equal partners in society, industry and the economy.’

She supported quotas, stating that ‘quotas are a necessary short-term measure ... I support quotas and I believe that all women in politics should also show support for such a solution. A lot of men oppose quotas with the argument that they pave the way for non-professional and less-prepared women to get to high positions in parties and governments. I do not see the validity of such arguments and completely disagree with them’. She concluded with the hope that ‘with the approach of the European elections, the topic will be put much higher on the agenda and will get more media coverage.’

The barriers

This session examined the so-called demand-side barriers to women who decide to get involved in politics and political decision-making and find their progress in politics blocked. A link between the supply-side and demand-side barriers was immediately made.

“ *‘This discussion is related to the discussion on barriers women impose on themselves. These internal barriers reflect the way society obstructs women’s participation in decision-making.’* Barbara

A framework of four sets of barriers was identified and discussed in the debate — the operation of political parties, the organisation of democratic institutions, political processes and the media. Once again, the economic and financial crisis was also identified as problematic, in that the issue of gender equality has gone off the agenda.

The internal operations of political parties can present barriers.

“ *‘Political parties often abuse women’s potential (young women) but do not offer them good places on voting lists in exchange.’* Veronika Bartha Toth

Democratic institutions can fail to address the needs of members with caring responsibilities.

“ *‘At the institution level everyone knows the picture of the Italian MEP breastfeeding in the European Parliament, but in what countries does the state provide parliamentarians with crèche and kindergarten services?’* Veronika Bartha Toth

Electoral systems were a particular focus when examining the political processes that can enable women or create barriers.

“ *‘Electoral systems are crucial. In Italy the current rules make the party top management choose the candidates to propose in their list. A few political parties voluntarily applied bottom-up selection methods and the result was a more gender-balanced list of candidates.’* Graziano Di Paola



An electoral system that gave positive results was reported from Italy.

“*In Italy, for the local elections we can choose the candidate to the municipal council by expressing a vote of preference. We have a list of candidates and the voter chooses their best candidate by writing the name on the ballot. In the past the voter could choose only one preference. From this year the voter can choose two preferences but they must be a man and a woman.*’ Francesca Ragno

However, even with good intentions, careful design is required of electoral systems that seek to enhance gender equality.

“*The gender parity for the NCA (National Constituent Assembly) elections [in Tunisia] did not guarantee equal representation for women because most political parties did not nominate women as heads of candidate lists. As a result 24 % of the NCA seats are held by women members.*’ Oueslati

Finally, media coverage, and the lack of it, can hinder progress for women in political decision-making.

“*During the last parliamentary elections [in Greece] the General Secretariat for Gender Equality asked the National TV and Radio Broadcasting Authority (ESR) to permit, free of charge, the broadcasting of the message “During these elections, ignore gender stereotypes. Vote for women too”. The ESR refused free-of-charge broadcasting, with the justification that the message exceeds the scope of gender equality.*’ Maria Karageorgou

The actions

A range of actions has been developed across the Member States and at EU level to address demand-side barriers. Standards for the operation of, and behaviour in, democratic institutions and in political parties have been developed. Different forms of quota systems have been implemented.

Quota systems were identified as the key, if controversial, means of achieving change.

“*A binding system is desirable, a quota system. However, it is not consistent with the campaign 50:50. Having a double preference system in candidate lists helps (maybe) to increase gender sensitive thinking in voters.*’ Siusi Casaccia

The courts, women’s associations and women already elected to political positions are seen to have roles to play in addressing these barriers. These three actors combined to create some significant change in Italy.

“*In Italy a series of decisions of the administrative courts related to the composition of local governments (on the basis of lack of implementation of national laws on equal opportunities) has put the attention of public opinion on the importance of the principle of equal opportunities expressed in our constitution. Thanks to the actions of women’s associations and women deputies the parliament passed a new electoral law for local elections that introduced the “double gender preference” vote and the compulsory presence of women in local government.*’ Francesca Ragno

A combination of different actions and levels of action is required. This was posed in terms of a ‘kit’ of actions.

“*We need a woman-friendly kit ... electoral system, rules for the participation of women in the media and electoral campaigns ... a strong action against cultural stereotypes.*’ Assunta Sarlo

Session 4: Building for the future

Claudette Abela Baldacchino, MEP from Malta, provided a contribution for the final session of the online discussion. She was supportive of quotas but felt that, although important, gender quotas were not enough on their own.

‘I believe that quotas are valuable supportive measures,’ she said. ‘However, we cannot be satisfied with gender quotas alone, as sustainable policy implementation that empowers women is the only way to achieve gender equality. Gender equality is not only about adopting legislative measures — it is also about culture and changing our society’s mentality regarding the role of women. The European Union must show its support for the empowerment of women.’

She was upbeat about the potential of the current moment. ‘There are many opportunities for change at present and many things have already been done to induce change. For example, the report on ‘Women on boards’ (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/women-on-boards-reports>) can help create better opportunities for women not only within these very important individual structures and entities, but also within sectors of our societies in which the positions of power are concentrated in the hands of men.’ She stressed that ‘It is not enough to pay lip service to gender equality, we need to create strong structures within our societies to truly advance gender equality.’

She emphasised education as a key force for change. ‘Initiatives for change can be stimulated through education. Education is the key



to empowering not only women but also everyone alike. We must use education to better our societies in the way we view each other.’

Quotas

Quota systems were a focus for debate throughout the day. The three MEPs who participated were supportive of quotas and overall this support for quotas was reflected in the debate.

“*‘On the one hand quota systems make sure women take an active role in policy decision-making ... on the other hand, women developing such tasks may be undervalued since, according to certain male patterns, they have been given the seat without effort or personal value. Anyway they are necessary. To open up the political system is the first stage to become real citizens.’* Foundation of One-Parent Families Isadora Duncan

It was acknowledged that there were arguments against quotas.

“*‘People who are against quotas claim that they are against the principle of equal opportunity for all, since women are given preference. They are, therefore, undemocratic since they prevent voters from electing their representatives.’* Veronika Bartha Toth

The careful design of quotas was seen as important if they are to have the desired effect.

“*‘If quotas apply to party lists then what happens is that men will be on the elective spots and women will be somewhere on the lists ... to show diversity and equality.’* Irina Costache

Opportunities

The elections to the European Parliament are seen as offering an important focus for change in relation to the situation of women in political decision-making. This was summed up in a visionary statement that pointed to the need for these elections to reflect greater equality in terms of the presence of women in the Parliament but also in terms of the agenda that emerges from the Parliament.

“*‘I would hope for a new European Parliament with a much stronger female presence, not only in numbers but also in decision-making. I would like to see issues of work–life balance, maternity protection, equal pay, anti-violence and anti-harassment policies high up on the agendas of parties. I would like to see a Parliament ensuring financial tools for gender mainstreaming, training of women and women’s entrepreneurship. I would like to see a Parliament decisive enough to vote for the compulsory division of parental care and parental leave between parents. I would like to see a Parliament voting for incentives for men to become carers. I would like to see an equality-oriented European Parliament.’* Maria Karageorgou

Civil society action presents opportunities for change in relation to women in political decision-making. Civil society has a key role in progressing change with the forthcoming elections.

“*‘Civil society could play a great role in raising awareness. [It] could launch a communications campaign to choose women when voting at the EU elections. It would be effective and simple to organise if coordinated among women’s association’s networks.’* Graziano Di Paola

Conclusions

Valuable commitments to gender equality in political decision-making have been made by the European Parliament and the European Commission. The forthcoming elections to the European Parliament provide an opportunity to make further progress on this issue. There remain significant inequalities, across the EU, for women in political decision-making. Progress towards equality is slow and there is some evidence that progress already made is being reversed in some Member States.

There is both a broad justice-based argument for gender balance in political representation and a strong argument for change based on the quality and nature of our democracy. Political parties need to be convinced of the gains that can be made from gender equality in terms of access to the full range of talents available and the potential for attracting a wider voter base. Arguments for change based on supposed characteristics of women or on a narrow definition of inter-



ests can be problematic as they have the potential to take an essentialist view of women, to be elitist and to isolate women within a narrow interest base.

There are supply-side barriers preventing women from seeking decision-making positions in politics. The cultural pressures that arise from stereotypes of women and the gendered understanding of roles for women negatively influence women's decision to participate in politics. Education has a key role to play in achieving necessary cultural change.

There is a lack of supports for reconciliation of work and family life, making it difficult for women to find time to launch a political career. Often women do not have access to the economic resources and the networks that are required to engage in politics. Women can also face barriers of low self-confidence and low self-esteem.

Political parties often fail to offer role models for women. They can ghettoise women into particular policy areas and roles. One proposal made on a number of occasions was that standards be established for political parties.

There are demand-side barriers within political parties, democratic institutions and political processes. Candidate selection by political parties and their placement of women on electoral lists can militate against women. The rules and procedures of political parties need to be a focus for change. Democratic institutions can fail to respond to the needs of members with caring responsibilities. Electoral systems can present barriers, with some being more attuned to achieving gender equality than others. Quotas were proposed as having a key role to play in securing new access for women to political decision-making and dismantling demand-side barriers.

The opportunity presented by the European Parliament elections needs to be seized both in terms of achieving an increased presence of women in political decision-making and in terms of ensuring that new agendas for gender equality emerge from the next European Parliament. Civil society campaigns are important in achieving this change and women's associations need to be supported in this work.

Annex I — Resources

List of resources made available on the EuroGender platform during the discussion

1. Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (created by UN member states and women from around the world in 1995, at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women).
<http://eurogender.eige.europa.eu/documents/beijing-declaration-and-platform-action>
2. 'Beijing+10: Progress made within the European Union' report from the Luxembourgish Presidency of the Council of the European Union giving an overview of the most important developments towards gender equality in the EU and completing the EU's follow-up of the 12 areas of critical concern on the Platform for Action.
<http://eurogender.eige.europa.eu/documents/beijing10-progress-made-within-european-unionreport-luxembourg-presidency-council-european>
3. 'Beijing+15: The Platform for Action and the European Union', report from the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the European Union containing the third review at EU level of the implementation of the 12 critical areas of concern of the Platform for Action.
<http://eurogender.eige.europa.eu/documents/beijing15-platform-action-and-european-unionreport-swedish-presidency-council-european>
4. Burri, S., 'Positive action', discussion paper prepared within the framework of the legal seminar on 'Approaches to equality and non-discrimination legislation inside and outside the EU', October 2011.
<http://eurogender.eige.europa.eu/documents/positive-action-discussion-paper>
5. European Commission, 'A women's charter' (COM (2010) 78 final) (declaration confirming and strengthening the commitment of the European Commission to making equality between women and men a reality).
<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:0078:FIN:EN:PDF>
6. European Commission, 'Strategy for equality between women and men 2010–15' (COM (2010) 491 final) (the Euro-



pean Commission work programme on gender equality).

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2010:0491:FIN:en:PDF>

7. European Commission, 'Women and men in decision-making' database (data on political decision-making at European and national levels updated quarterly).
http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/gender-decision-making/database/highlights/index_en.htm
8. European Commission Directorate-General for Justice, 'Women in decision-making positions', report prepared within the framework of the legal seminar on 'Approaches to equality and non-discrimination legislation inside and outside the EU', October 2011.
<http://eurogender.eige.europa.eu/documents/positive-action-discussion-paper>
9. European Institute for Gender Equality, 'Gender Equality Index Report', EIGE, 2013 (a comprehensive map of gender gaps in the EU and across the Member States).
<http://eurogender.eige.europa.eu/documents/gender-equality-index-report>
10. European Parliament, 'Action for gender balance in the European Parliament — EP elections 2014', 2013 (study produced for the workshop on this theme held by the FEMM Committee).
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201307/20130708ATT69362/20130708ATT69362EN.pdf>
11. European Parliament, 'Electoral gender quota systems and their implementation in Europe — Update 2013', 2013 (an update of the 2011 study on electoral gender quotas and their implementation in Europe).
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201307/20130708ATT69360/20130708ATT69360EN.pdf>
12. European Parliament, 'Report on women in political decision-making: quality and equality', 2012 (Sirpa Pietikainen was rapporteur to this report adopted by the European Parliament).
<http://eurogender.eige.europa.eu/documents/report-women-political-decision-making-quality-and-equality>
13. Hubert, A., 'Moving beyond quotas in the EU: An emerging stage of democracy', paper presented at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance/CEE Network for Gender Issues Conference, Budapest, 2004.
<http://eurogender.eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EC.pdf>
14. Parity Democracy Website, 2013 (website of a project coordinated by the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies, in partnership with the European Women's Lobby, the Women's Employment Information Centre (Lithuania), the Forum 50% (Czech Republic) and the Romanian Women's Lobby (Romania).
<http://paritydemocracy.eu>
15. Phillips, A., 'Democracy and the representation of difference and the politics of presence: problems and developments', GEP Research Programme on Gender, Empowerment and Politics, 2000 (papers address the politics of ideas and the politics of presence from a gender equality perspective).
http://vbn.aau.dk/files/49900648/GEP_Tesktserie_No4_2000.pdf
16. 'Women's participation in politics', Houses of the Oireachtas, Joint Committee on Justice, Defence, Equality and Human Rights, Rapporteur Report by Senator Ivana Bacik, Ireland, 2009 (report establishing the barriers to women's participation in politics in terms of childcare, cash, confidence, culture and candidate selection).
http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/committees30thdail/j-justiceedwr/reports_2008/20091105.pdf

Additional references provided by participants

1. European Parliament, 'Women in decision-making: the role of the new media for increased participation', 2013 (study reviewing the barriers to women's involvement in politics and how new media may help to increase women's involvement at different levels of political participation).
[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/493010/IPOL-FEMM_ET\(2013\)493010_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2013/493010/IPOL-FEMM_ET(2013)493010_EN.pdf)
2. The Mediterranean Institute for Gender Studies has developed petitions of support for the parity democracy project (<http://www.thunderclap.it/projects/4679-vote-change-vote-for-women>) and a joint declaration demanding parity at all levels (<http://www.paritydemocracy.eu/take-action>).
3. Women for Election in Ireland provides training course for women interested in participating in politics (<http://www.womenforelection.ie/our-programmes/>).
4. Forum 50 % in the Czech Republic has developed a video clip campaign (<http://www.youtube.com/user/zenyvpolitice>).



Annex II — List of participants

Name	Organisation	Country
Agata Czarnacka	Policy and democracy expert	Poland
ALDE Gender Equality Network	ALDE Gender Equality Network	EU
Assunta Sarlo	Journalist	Italy
Barbara Finta	Independent expert	Hungary
Barbara Leda Kenny	Cultura Lavoro srl	Italy
Christina Andersson	Ambassador coordinator	Sweden
Claudette Abela Baldacchino	MEP	Malta
Claudia Padovani	University of Padua	Italy
Dimitri Tsoutsias	EIGE	Lithuania
Elisabetta Addis	Professor	Italy
Emma Pietrafesa	INAIL	Italy
Erika Schulze	European Parliament	EU
Francesca Ragno	Aspettare Stanca Association	Italy
Giuliana Cacciapuotì	Women for Female Toponymy	Italy
Graziano Di Paola	Cultura Lavoro srl	Italy
Ina Volmut	Office for Gender Equality of the Government of the Republic of Croatia	Croatia
Indre Mackeviciute	EIGE	Lithuania
Irina Costache	Association for Liberty and Gender Equality	Romania
Foundation of One-Parent Families Isadora Duncan	Foundation of One-Parent Families Isadora Duncan	Spain



Katarzyna Pabijanek	EIGE	Lithuania
Marcela Adamusová	Forum 50 %	Czech Republic
Maria Karageorgou	Senior investigator with the Greek Ombudsman	Greece
Marusya Lyubcheva	MEP	Bulgaria
Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies in Cyprus	Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies in Cyprus	Cyprus
Moufida Oueslati	Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in the Arab World	Tunisia
Niall Crowley	Independent expert	Ireland
Nina Sirk	Researcher and independent expert	Slovenia
Pavla Špondrová	Experts' Forum	Czech Republic
Sandor Kaszas	Independent expert	Hungary
Siobán O'Brien Green	National researcher	Ireland
Sirpa Pietikäinen	MEP	Finland
Siusi Casaccia	European Women's Lobby (EWL)	Italy
Veronika Bartha Toth	Researcher and lecturer	Hungary
Veronika Šprincová	Forum 50 %	Czech Republic

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<https://eige.europa.eu/newsletter>

<https://eurogender.eige.europa.eu/>



