

L'Europe au féminin : pour une vraie parité

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Reaching parity: a moment of truth for European Democracy



Ladies and Gentlemen,

Not more that two years ago we rightly celebrated 50 years of European cooperation and the many results and success achieved since the signature of the Treaty of Rome. As you know, the principle of gender equality is enshrined in the EC Treaty since 1957.

Unfortunately, today we cannot celebrate full equality between women and men. And definitely, we cannot rejoice ourselves of a 50/50 presence of women in European politics.

Despite Treaty rules and legislation on equal opportunities, despite considerable progress, women have not yet acquired full equality. Inequalities still exist and women face many problems in their daily life.

I would like to share with you some thoughts about the problems we face and the challenges ahead of us.

Discrimination against women is still commonly practised in Europe – from less access to leading positions, to the overall 17% pay gap. In some Member States the gender gap is even over 25%! The wage gap may be closing but so slowly that it will take another 70 years before everyone is paid the same money for the same job. Closing the gender gap is vital to improve the living standards, fighting poverty and increase economic growth.

Striking a balance between working life and family life is still a problem. Childcare facilities in many EU countries are still considered a luxury, not a necessity, and it is usually the woman rather than the man who agrees to stay home with the kids. In addition, women in Europe do some four hours of homework a day, on top of their paid work and often in addition to looking after elderly parents. Put simply, family life limits a woman's career prospects more than a man's.

A third issue is domestic violence, which is still a reality for a great share of women in Europe. Statistically, one in three women in Europe will suffer physical or sexual violence in a relationship –

and many will continue to suffer violence from their former partner even after the break-up. And we must eradicate human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Furthermore, in the past five years, there has been very little progress in terms of improving women's presence in EU decision-making. The average number of female members of national parliaments is today 24% - only 1% higher than in 2005. The share of female ministers in national governments has increased from 22% to 26% during the last five years, but this is still below the critical mass of 30%. Gender balance improved slightly for the European Parliament after the last elections in June – the share of women went from 30.9% to 34%. But there are still Member States who have very few or no female MEPs!

A more gender balanced society would be good not only for women, but for the EU as a whole. There are mainly three reasons why women need to be brought on board, in decision-making at all levels in Europe:

1. The democratic reason: We not a minority. Women make up for a majority of Europe's population. In the 21st century European societies cannot afford to use only half of its people's talents, ideas and experiences. When women sit at the table, they can help to ensure that the political decisions reflect the needs of the *entire* population. Including women in decision-making would make Europe richer and more representative and bring it closer to all citizens. I am not arguing that women are better than men; there are different !

2. The social reason: Reconciliation of work and family life is good not only for women, but for all. Flexible working hours, affordable day care services for children, and tele-working options increase the quality of life for both women and men.

3. The economic reason: Women mean prosperity and growth. Many studies and research shows that gender equality has a positive impact on economic development. Reducing the gender gap would have a large positive impact on the increase of GDP. Today we also know that there is a correlation between presence of women in the company's leadership, and the company's profitability. Financial outperformance is most significant when there is a critical mass of women – 30 percent or more. So women mean business

These considerations should be high on the EU's political agenda – but they are not. So we have to find ways to break the current situation in Europe of women under-representation in politics.

Political parties must increase the number of women candidates for all elections. It's true that the situation differs from country to country, in both cultural and legal terms. Even where the legislation does not provide for quota or "zip lists", political pressure on European and national political parties can give some results. The question is whether political pressure is enough!

One viable solution is to introduce quotas – both in the private and the public sector. No other means can address effectively today's de facto discrimination, where men choose men. I always refer to the success-story example Norway, where quotas of 40% women in Company Boards have lead to better leadership. Why? Because men follow the women's example of asking for more training.

Take the example of the elections for the European Parliament. The 1979 Electoral Act is completely silent on gender equality. No mention of incentive measures, not mention of targets, no mention of quota. The Act deserves a fresh look from the gender equality perspective.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today is an important day and a moment of truth for European democracy. EU Heads of States and governments will meet for a special Summit and decide upon two remaining top EU posts: the President of the European Council and the High Representative/Vice-President of the European Commission. In terms of gender equality at the top of the EU, it is not looking good. In the end, we run the risk that the EU will be lead by four men.

A new European Commission will also be appointed in the coming days Though President José Manuel Barroso has urged his fellow members of the European Council to keep in mind the importance of gender balance when presenting their candidates; it still looks as if the new Commission will have fewer women than the current one.

As I wrote in the Financial Times earlier this week, together with Commissioner Neelie Kroes and EP Vice-President Diana Wallis: This would be bad for Europe, bad for democracy and bad for women.

It is time to move from words to deeds on gender equality by appointing women to leading positions in the EU. We have the support of Jerzy Buzek, president of the European Parliament, also suggested recently to the European Council.

I do not think that there is a lack of names; nor a shortage of qualities and competence. Many women are active in European politics, working for the benefit of our societies. In our letter we mentioned three of them: Vaira Vike-Freiberga, Elisabeth Guigou and Catherine Ashton.

The system of men choosing men implies that women risk becoming invisible. And it is important to make them visible as well. In the past already we made list of women how deserve to be mentioned.

I was delighted to see that in the Robert Schuman Foundation launched an online voting poll (http://www.robert-schuman.eu/vote_en.php) for the new EU President and that Ms Mrs Vaira Vike-Freiberga, former President of Latvia, had got 63% of the votes out of around 18.500 voters.

Today we may be seeing the first step towards real change in Europe; towards a more democratic union that better reflects the needs and wishes of its entire population.

Let's hope that our Heads of States and Governments will be bold enough and to take the decision to appointing at least one woman for the post of President and the post as High Representative.

Remember, the right man in the right job is often a woman!

Thank you for listening.