



International Women's Day: call for quotas for women

Committees: Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality

Quotas are needed to ensure equal representation of women in the private and public sectors, agreed most participants in a meeting held by the EP Women's Rights and Gender Equality Committee with national parliaments' representatives on Thursday, ahead of the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day on 8 March. Speakers also advocated changing national electoral rules to increase women's representation at local, regional and national level in politics.

Women's Rights Committee Chair Eva-Britt Svensson (GUE/NGL, SE), stressed the progress made since the women's rights movement had begun fighting for the right to work, to vote and education. She noted that this European Parliament, 35.2% of whose members are women, is the most gender-balanced yet. However, the transition to gender equality is not proceeding fast, and much remains to be done, she said.

Equality as a basic right

Women's participation in high-level decision-making is a question of equality and fundamental rights, noted Finnish MEP Sirpa Pietikäinen (EPP), who will draft a report on women in politics. "Equality in society didn't add up as long as the structures of power remained the same", she said, adding that "by involving more women in decision making we make better politics".

Warning against throwing away 50% of society's energy and intelligence, Women's Rights Committee Vice-chair Elisabeth Morin-Chartier (EPP, FR) stressed that the fight for gender equality is a collective one and a societal issue.

Former President of the European Parliament Nicole Fontaine emphasized the will and determination of the EU institutions to advance the cause of women against discrimination, not only as a matter of fairness and justice, but because this issue relates to the functioning of democracy - the fundamental value of building a united Europe - and the harmonious organization of our societies.

Women in politics: quotas

Speaking at the opening of the Women's Rights committee meeting to mark the 100th anniversary of the International Women's Day, EP President Jerzy Buzek stressed his support for quotas. Women can influence legislation, he said, adding that although over 40% of Parliament's vice-presidents, quaestors and committee chairs are women, this is not enough. He added that Member States should change their electoral systems to get more women into politics.

Mary Robinson (President, Mary Robinson Foundation) pointed out that in the majority of EU Member States, the proportion of women in the lower house of parliament is below 23%, and in two, less than 10%. "Clearly the traditional barriers remain strong enough to deter or defeat women candidates: lack of adequate financial resources, disproportionate

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family obligations, lack of confidence in a predominantly male culture, a preference of many women to serve in civil society organisations where the culture is more friendly and gender sensitive", she said.

Whereas MPs from Greece, Hungary and Romania, said that only a small proportion of their countries' politicians are female, those from France and Montenegro highlighted their gender equality legislation.

Rovana Plumb (S&D, RO), suggested using the EU's "citizen's initiative" system to impose quotas.

Nele Lijnen, Chair of the Belgian Senate's Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities, said that women are less spontaneous than men about signing up for promotions or higher positions, and likewise for political mandates. "Women on an electoral list should not be seen as a necessary evil but as an asset ", she added.

Ilda Figueiredo (GUE/NGL, PT), stressed that cuts made in many social services during the economic and social crisis made it more difficult for women to participate in political life.

Condemned to excellence

In the political world, as elsewhere, women have to prove they are competent. Women are therefore "condemned" to diligence and excellence, but they know that ultimately find it inspiring", commented former EP President Nicole Fontaine.

Reconciling work and family life

President Buzek favoured part-time work, flexible working hours and better day-care facilities to allow women who are mothers to combine work and family life. In addition, men should be enabled to get involved in care of their children, he added.

Marlene Rupprecht, of the German Bundestag Committee on Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, said that gender equality is being stunted by traditional gender roles.

Women's Rights Committte Vice-chair Livia Járóka (EPP, HU), argued that not only the knowhow of elites, but also that of women from grassroots level, is important.

Workshop for journalists

On 8 March, the European Parliament Press Service will hold a journalist's workshop entitled "Women in Leadership" in Strasbourg (WIC 200 at 14.00h). MEPs, journalists and external experts will discuss ways to get more women into leading positions in private and public sectors, for example through quotas for equal representation of women.