

Women in International Politics: Glass Ceilings



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ON THE SAME day that French Socialist Party members chose Ségolène Royal as their presidential candidate, the European Parliament approved a report on 'Women in International Politics'. This report gives an overview of the participation of women in international decision-making centres. It also makes recommendations to tackle the clear participation deficit.

There is, indeed, some progress: recently, several women were elected heads of State in Finland, Liberia and Chile and heads of Government in Germany, Jamaica and South Korea. The European Union Presidency is currently headed, for the second consecutive time, by a woman, Chancellor Angela Merkel. Nancy Pelosi is the first woman elected as Speaker of the House of Representatives in the US. Several women are today in charge of ministries of foreign affairs, defence and finances. And the European Institute for Gender Equality was recently approved.

But the visibility of these advances does not outshine the figures, which show a global reality that still lags behind what is desirable. Despite the Beijing Declaration and the MDGs, only 15 women are heads of State and Government in 191 Members of the United Nations. And only 16 per cent of all Parliamentarians worldwide are women. Despite the 1325 Resolution of the UN Security Council (UNSC), which since 2000 calls for the incorporation of women at all levels of interna-

tional negotiations, conflict resolution and peacekeeping missions, only 9 out of 91 Representatives or Envoys of the Secretary-General are women. And women are still under-represented in conflict prevention and resolution teams, especially in top positions.

In Europe, the picture is hardly better. Despite Resolution 2025 of the European Parliament, also approved in 2000, and despite the EU Commission's 'Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men', the Commission composition still hasn't reached parity. And there is only 1 woman among 14 positions of Special and Personal Representatives, Envoys or Special Coordinators of the High Representative for CFSP. And among 107 heads of Delegations of the European Commission around the world, only 7 are women.

Notwithstanding, there are plenty of qualified and competent women with solid experience in the fields of international relations, human rights, security and defence, justice, public administration, election processes, media and communications, who have skills that are essential in diplomatic negotiations, peace keeping missions and conflict prevention or resolution. They are present at all levels of the European Institutions, public administrations, enterprises, universities and NGOs throughout Europe. At all levels, except for the top. At the political and economic decision-making bodies in Europe, women are still outrageously under-represented. Despite the fact that

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there are more women than men with higher education diplomas, the gender pay gap is approximately 15 per cent, when equivalent jobs are compared, in clear violation of various community and national laws against gender discrimination.

As recognised by Commissioner Frattini, during the debate held by the European Parliament on this report: ‘Those taking most decisions are men. Stereotypes and discrimination still exist and the recruitment and promotion systems are generally biased’. In fact, these systems tend to perpetuate the establishment of the ‘old boys network’, excluding women from the informal networks that actually select who is next in promotion lines. These networks are especially important inside political parties, economic and political decision-making centres and their national and international hierarchies. More than a balanced division of family responsibilities - women continue to bear the biggest load at home - this is the main obstacle for women to reach the top positions of national and international decision-making bodies and to participate in UN, EU, OSCE and NATO missions.

Even if the data is in itself significant, in this case it is important to go beyond the numbers: women's political participation must be ensured not only as a matter of equity and justice but also because numbers count to make the difference. Women make a substan-

tial difference in the definition of political agendas - and, especially, in the definition of what really matters: in favour of human rights - and women rights - peace and reconciliation, justice, good governance, transparency, accountability, democracy and the rule of law.

The qualitative difference made by women's participation in peacekeeping missions or international peace negotiations is recognised by the UNSC, in its 1325 Resolution, as crucial for the improvement of the performance and effectiveness of such missions. Women constitute the large majority of conflict victims, displaced persons and refugees. Yet, in general, they were not the ones taking the decisions that lead to war and conflict or allowed its prolongation. Without giving voice to women in these societies and without involving them in the peace building processes, there can be no true reconciliation or lasting solution. The presence of women in conflict mediation is essential to build trust and foster the participation of other local women. The recent all-women UN police unit sent to Liberia, composed entirely by Indian women, is a result of this very recognition of the contribution women bring to the effectiveness of these missions. This is also what the report ‘Women in International Politics’ recommends to the Secretary General and the Security Council of the United Nations and to those responsible for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). These should not only preach this doctrine, but actually start implementing it, towards a more general inclusion of women in all peace keeping, peace enforcing and conflict resolution missions.

This report also contains other recommendations to the most relevant actors in the international scene, including the UN, the EU and its member states, local and regional authorities as well as national parliaments and political parties.

The EU governments and the European Commission should assume their responsibilities and recommend women to high level positions, to improve the efficiency of its CFSP and ESDP. But it is not enough to appoint women to such positions. It is also essential to put into practice the necessary measures to ensure that women and men can strike a balance between private life and professional life. And that requires changes, namely regarding working hours and working practices.

It is crucial to engage European political parties in a serious promotion of a balanced participation of men and women on their lists. Political parties must contribute to eliminate all obstacles that directly or indirectly prevent women from participating. Women's participation at all levels of decision-making processes, in all political bodies and all lists of nominees or candidates must be ensured, in the same measure as men. This report also calls for further training opportunities, aiming at providing the necessary skills that can open doors to engagement in a political career and to reach high level positions.

The report further suggests educational programmes to raise citizen awareness on women's rights. If gender awareness is considerable in northern European countries, in other regions, stereotypes are widespread - sometimes to a shocking extent - in the media, commercials, every-day language, etc., with political leaders not actually paying sufficient attention to this problem.

The report also calls on the Commission to use community external relations and development cooperation instruments as engines to foster the promotion of gender equality in third countries, since gender discrimination is a violation of human rights. Without the contributions of women, these countries will not be able to reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) or make real progress in

terms of good governance.

A balanced representation of men and women in political and economic decision-making centres is crucial in the EU and around the world. Without such balance, there is no real representative democracy. The lack of reasonable numbers of women contributing to political agendas means that there is a democracy deficit. Political will is required to fight this deficit. As demonstrated by the parity government of José Luis Zapatero. Or the current Parliament of Rwanda, which, led by UN efforts, changed the electoral system in order to guarantee parity: Rwanda today has the highest percentage of women in Parliament in the world: 48,8 per cent. These examples demonstrate that changes in this domain could take place at a much faster pace: but only if there is political leadership, with real political will to break the glass ceilings.