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## REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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## Introduction

A more balanced representation of men and women in the European Parliament would mean a more democratic representation of the population of the Member States. For this reason the European Parliament is constantly making efforts to promote gender equality and to break the glass ceiling. The glass ceiling is a symbolic obstacle "so subtle that it is transparent, yet so strong that it prevents women from moving up the corporate hierarchy." ${ }^{11}$ The inequality also applies to salaries. The average difference between a man and a woman in the same position is $16.2 \%$. "To put it another way, women in Europe work 59 days for nothing." ${ }^{2}$ What is more, $97 \%$ of the CEOs of larger companies are men. ${ }^{3}$ It is not based on individuals or their capabilities but is applied to women as a group. The European Parliament does not only need to achieve change in its own bodies but the goal is to reach gender balance in Member States as well. For this a strong collaboration is needed between European, national and regional levels. Plenty of traditional stereotypes and cultural discrimination are against the change. The working conditions of women are also full of problems waiting for solutions, such as: the missing childcare facilities, the lack of work-life balance and women are also more exposed to economic crises and poverty.

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## The increasing representation of women in the European Parliament

Although the number of women in the European Parliament is slowly but steadily increasing, this improvement is still insufficient. Last year the proportion of female members of the European Parliament was $35.8 \%$, which is higher than their representation in national parliaments, where women are present with $21.8 \%$. This is a great achievement not to be underrated in light of the past decades. But there is still a long way till the realisation of gender balance. As it can be seen from the graph below, significant changes were made to the proportion of women in the European Parliament by the first European elections held in 1979, and the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. Since 1979 the Members of Parliament are elected directly. From that on the proportion of women amongst MEPs is constantly increasing by an average of $3 \%$ in every five-year term. ${ }^{4}$ The third significant increase in the representation of women happened after the 2009 elections. By this time in most of the countries the percentage of women MEPs became higher than their respective national parliaments. ${ }^{5}$


Proportion of female members of the European Parliament 1952-2014 ${ }^{6}$
Regarding the composition of political parties in the EP, we can find that only two out of seven parties are led by men. Furthermore, while more than half of the European citizens are women, only four committees have at least $50 \%$ of female members and increase is showing mostly in those committees that already have a higher percentage of female membership.

[^1]

Representation of women and men in the European Parliament, $2013^{7}$
Altogether women are represented by a $36 \%$ in the European Parliament, which is nearly the double of the world average in national parliaments, which is around $22 \%$ at the present. ${ }^{8}$ Only six of the member states have better gender-proportions in their national parliaments than in the European Parliament. However if we look at the proportion of women amongst the Members of Parliament of each country, we can see a significant disparity between Member States. With a few exceptions, smaller countries are more likely to have a better gender proportion. The reason behind this can be that in smaller countries each individual member has a greater contribution to the overall figure. "For example, both Estonia and Malta have 3 women out of 6 MEPs ( $50 \%$ ) compared, respectively, to $21 \%$ and $14 \%$ women in the national parliament." ${ }^{\text {" }}$

[^2]
## The Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality

In 1979 the European Parliament created an ad hoc committee on women's rights and equal opportunities. The late 1970's was a great leap forward considering women's rights and gender equality. The committee became permanent in 1984. Since its creation the committee is responsible for "the definition, promotion and protection of women's rights in the Union and related measures; the promotion of women's rights in third countries, equal opportunities policy, including gender equality with regard to employment opportunities and working conditions; the removal of all forms of gender-based discrimination, the implementation and further development of gender mainstreaming in all policy sectors; the follow-up and implementation of international agreements and conventions involving the rights of women and information policy on issues relating to women." ${ }^{10}$ In 2013 the committee initiated a procedure titled Equality between women and men in the European Union - 2012. ${ }^{11}$ The procedure was debated in the Parliament but finally in March, 2014 it was rejected. Nevertheless several other processes were completed in 2014, such are the following ones: Educational and occupational mobility of women in the EU, Eliminating gender stereotypes in the $E U$ and Undocumented women migrants in the $E U$, among others.

In 2015 the committee introduced the EU Strategy for equality between women and men post 2015. It calls on the European Commission to introduce a specific pillar for equality between women and men in the Europe 2020 strategy. ${ }^{12}$ It also requires the Commission to gather gender-specific data in all policy areas. The draft report calls for an action plan taking into account specific suggestions in fields of violence against women, work and time, women in power and decision-making, financial resources, health, knowledge, education and the media, the wider world and institutional mechanisms and gender mainstreaming. ${ }^{13}$ The report contains a detailed list of necessary actions in all of these areas. The report serves as an input from the European Parliament to the Commission regarding the prospective Strategy. The voting will take place on 6 May 2015 at the next Committee meeting in Brussels.

[^3]
## The 50/50 declaration

In November 2012 a cross-party coalition of MEPs started a new campaign. The "50/50 declaration" was supported by the European Women's Lobby. The goal of the campaign is to reach gender balance in every European institution. The signing of the declaration started on 21 November in Strasbourg at an official signing event. A great number of MEPs signed the document right at the signing ceremony. The main aim was to achieve gender balance for the elections of 2014.

The declaration calls on:

- "Each Member State to nominate one female and one male candidate for to the College of Commissioners and for all top jobs in the EU institutions;
- The Member States and Council of the EU to promote and ensure gender parity in the executive board and top positions of the European Central Bank;
- The political groups in the European Parliament to nominate one female and one male candidate for President of the European parliament, and to ensure gender parity in the nomination of chairpersons within Committees, as well as in the composition of the Bureaus;
- The European political parties to promote and ensure gender representation in their decision-making bodies and promote women candidates for decision-making positions in the European Parliament;
- National political parties to compose their electoral lists in such a way as to ensure gender parity in outcome at the 2014 European Elections;
- The European Council to put women in decision-making high on the political agenda." ${ }^{14}$

Until now more than 100 MEPs signed the declaration along with politicians from all around the world, members of civil society organisations and many other individual supporters who are dedicated to the matter. Despite the large number of signers and all the progress that had been made, gender balance has not been achieved by the set time. Then again the high number of signers shows a great consideration, which provides encouragement for the future.

[^4]
## Gender quotas

There is a growing need for a more efficient method of enforcing women's rights and achieving gender equality. One method is the gender quota applied in the national parliaments of over 100 countries. There are two kinds of electoral gender quotas: legislated quotas and party quotas. The legislated quotas (legal quotas) require parties to nominate a certain percentage of women as candidates. The party quotas (or voluntary party quotas) mean that the parties undertake an obligation to nominate given proportion of their own women members for elections. Both kind of quotas can be applied to all three stages of the candidate selection; aspirants, candidates and elected representatives.


Women's representation in national parliaments 2013, by type of quota ${ }^{15}$
According to the figure the proportion of women represented in national parliaments is similar in those countries where quotas are applied and where party quotas are used. Those countries who implement legal quotas reached a higher percentage of women representation. The high percentage of the third (no quota) group is due to the traditionally more gender balanced Denmark and Finland, where no quotas are applied. On the other hand Ireland initiated legal quotas in 2012 but women are only represented with $15 \%$ there. It has to be mentioned that the quotas does not mean that women are actually elected. There are many cases where female candidates are put to the bottom of the list, so they stand no chance.

[^5]
## The efforts of the European Commission to achieve gender-balance

The European Commission is continuously monitoring the participation of both genders in high-level decision-making positions. The data shows an improvement in the proportion of women in leadership positions in the European Union. This means that we are getting closer to the successful implementation of the Strategy for Equality between Women and Men (2010-2015). The strategy is aiming to achieve gender-balance on supranational, national and corporate level as well. The Commission, with the support of the European Parliament, is trying to solve the problem of under-representation of women in corporate leadership (which is the most acute field of under-representation) by launching initiatives. Unfortunately the efforts that had been made until 2012 towards reaching gender balance turned out not to be efficient enough. Seeing that self-regulation and public consultation did not live up to the expectations the Commission needed to find some stronger measures, so it resorted to legislative action and proposed a Directive in order to accelerate the process.

## The $40 \%$ objective

The proposed Directive establishes a procedural quota requiring $40 \%$ representation of women in non-executive board members of publicly listed companies by 2020. ${ }^{16}$ Those companies which do not meet the requirements will be expected to adopt clear and genderneutral selection criteria during the selection. Although if two candidates have same qualification the candidate of the under-represented gender will be given preference, the most important criteria for a job will be merit and qualification. The companies will still have the authority to appoint people for certain positions according to their own decision, but they will have to take into consideration a wider selection of applicants. The European Parliament voted about the Directive on 20 November 2013. "The legislation was adopted on its first reading, confirming the broad consensus to increase gender balance on corporate boards and general endorsement of the Commission's approach."17

The advancement in field of gender-balance is not evenly spread among Member States. Significant improvement was achieved in those countries which have taken or thought over

[^6]biding legislative measures or had thoroughly discussed the problem in public. The following figure shows the change in the proportion of women on boards from October 2010 to October 2013.


Change in the share of women on boards, EU-28, October 2010 - October $2013^{18}$
The most outstanding result was accomplished by France. Although in a few countries there was a decrease in the proportion of women on board, the great majority of Member States achieved improvement. Gender-balance can be viewed not only from a political point of view but the economic aspects are also to be considered. "The under-representation of women in corporate decision-making represents a significant economic cost to companies and to the economy as a whole, this at a time when Europe needs to fully exploit the talents of all parts of the workforce in order to ensure growth and ensure competitiveness." ${ }^{19}$

The strategy of the Commission includes mid-term and final targets as well. In order to accomplish a real change the representation of women should be gradually increased from the bottom up. This way a there will be a talent pool ensured for the future promotions. The strategy proved to be very effective. "By 1 October 2012, the percentage of women in management positions had increased to the extent that the European Commission had met or was on course to meet all three targets for 201275. It has been so successful in recruiting

[^7]women in top jobs that on 1 October 2012 it had already exceeded its target for women in senior management for 2014.,20

| European Commission | $1^{\text {st }}$ Oct 2012 | Target 2012 | Target 2014 |
| :--- | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| Senior management | $27.2 \%$ | $24.8 \%$ | $25 \%$ |
| Middle management | $28.7 \%$ | $27.7 \%$ | $30 \%$ |
| Non-management (administrative) | $42.4 \%$ | $42.7 \%$ | $43 \%$ |

Representation of women at three levels of European Commission ${ }^{21}$
A significant hindrance in reaching gender-balance is the traditional attitude of women. For example in Ireland it is extremely difficult to find women who want to run for office therefore it is quite a challenge to meet the $30 \%$ quota. ${ }^{22}$ One would easily jump to conclusions that women are supportive when it comes to gender quotas as it means a step towards gender balance and equality, but surprisingly more than half of the female voters are against gender quotas in the boardroom for example. Although academic theorists of gender, metropolitan media and the bureaucracy of the European commission in Brussels are in favour of the quotas, still only $30 \%$ of women support the quotas and another $51 \%$ are against them. ${ }^{23}$ One of the reasons could be that women in lower positions are rarely thinking about gender balance in the boardroom, they rather care about fair opportunities for promotion. "Corporate policies encouraging women to step forward - if they wish - and demonstrating that they're just as eligible for rising through the ranks, help promote women without patronising them. Placing female directors in the boardroom for their genders over their merits does not merely undermine the status of women executives collectively. It is exactly the type of tokenistic treatment that sends the wrong message to women, who only need a culture of due respect for effort to know that if they work hard for their goals they'll be seen and promoted on equal terms to their peers." ${ }^{24}$

[^8]
## The programme of exchange of good practice

The Commission is counting on the backing of its Directive by the Member States as well as the European Parliament, besides it is also providing assistance for Member States supporting their efforts to progress. The Commission offers a platform for the debate and exchange of experience in the framework of the programme of exchange of good practice. The programme is open for governmental representatives, independent experts and relevant stakeholders. In scope of the programme is the discussion of existing policy measures and examples. The programme helps focusing on the challenges and possibilities. Three seminars are arranged each year in different locations. "The exchanges will focus on the key priority areas of the Women's Charter Choose translations of the previous link and of the Strategy for equality between women and men 2010-2015."25 The first exchange seminars took place in 2008 and 2009. The last seminar was held in Finland in October 2014 on the role of men in gender equality.

## Conclusion

The EU entered joined several international agreements during the second term of José Manuel Barroso, President of the Commission. There was also an escalation in the representation of women both in the European Parliament and the European Commission. During Barroso's term, reaching equality and diversity in leadership were aimed at by the administration. On the other hand, despite all the progress, still $46 \%$ of women are not satisfied with their representation in the European Union. In spite of the fact that the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality is "relatively active in issuing political opinions and drafting initiatives, its direct law-making power is found to be minor. The committee is, moreover, one of the smallest and has been described as 'irrelevant' by MEPs. ${ }^{, 26}$

Polls show that people still consider politics as being dominated by men and women are more likely to be seen as the traditional figure of care givers. There is also a strong perception that men do not value the skill of women as leaders. Consequently women are not given

[^9]opportunities of positions of responsibility neither in public nor in private sphere. On the other hand in practice we can see that the community supports the idea of women in decisionmaking positions. " $70 \%$ of women and $60 \%$ of men [are] stating that $40 \%$ or more of the EP should be women. ${ }^{27}$ More than half of the European citizens consider gender-equality an important question, that should be dealt with, but the public is optimistic about the advancement already reached in the issue of gender-equality.

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