



Annual Colloquium on Fundamental Rights 2017
"Women's Rights in Turbulent Times"
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Concept paper by the European Commission and the European Institute for Gender Equality

Plenary B: Equal Representation at work and in politics: a fundamental rights prerequisite?

Aim of the session

Understanding the main causes of gender imbalance in economic and political domains is essential for finding ways to change the situation. The under-representation of women in economic leadership, politics and the labour market in general is a very broad and multifaceted issue that needs to be placed in the context of a number of policy efforts aimed at improving gender equality for both men and women at all levels of society, including education, employment, family and private life.

The session takes the form of a roundtable discussion. To enable as many discussants to take the floor as possible, please keep your interventions to 2 minutes.

Issues for discussion

- What is, from your perspective, the most urgent issue to address, and if there was one action you could take to improve the situation, what would it be?
- How can political and social engagement be extended to address the obstacles limiting women's participation in economic leadership, politics and the labour market in general?
- What measures, at EU and national level, could be most efficient to enhance women's economic empowerment and gender equality in economic and political leadership?
- How can women be encouraged to take up professions that were previously the preserve of men and what specific measures need to be implemented to increase the number of women occupying senior positions in business and politics?

Background

This paper addresses equal representation in all areas of public life and decision-making.

Gender equality is one of the fundamental values of the European Union and the principle of equality between women and men is enshrined in the Treaty on European Union and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. The Strategic engagement for gender equality 2016-2019 (European Commission, 2015) focuses on priorities including increasing female labour market participation and equal economic independence, reducing the gender pay, earnings and pension gaps, and promoting equality between women and men in decision-making.

On the 60th anniversary of the EU, women are much more present in public and economic life, but gender equality is still not a reality. Gender stereotypes are present in various areas throughout the EU, and negatively affect both women and men, particularly in the area of equal representation, women's position in the workplace, and in politics. Gender gaps persist and, in some domains, they are even bigger compared to a decade ago. With an average score of 66.2 (out of 100) for gender equality, the EU is still far from reaching a gender-equal society (EIGE, 2017).

Economic independence of women

Gender equality in employment is crucial for women's and men's economic independence, social inclusion, health and well-being and the overall achievement of their personal aspirations. The EU has made some progress in this area. However, while women's economic empowerment has increased, housework and childcare are still largely considered women's responsibility. This makes the working week for average women 6 hours longer than that of average men (Eurofound, 2017). Reconciliation is a key element for achieving higher employment rates for women and men and narrowing the persistent gender pay gap of 16% (Eurostat, 2017).

In addition to the unequal sharing of domestic tasks and care responsibilities, segregation in education and the labour market is an important factor that narrows women's life choices, leads to gender gaps in wages which turn into significant gaps in pensions at retirement, further reinforces gender stereotypes, while also perpetuating unequal gender power relations in the public and private spheres.

Though women are working in all occupations, their share within some occupations is still minor, e.g. among engineers, ICT professionals etc. Professions in healthcare and law are examples of higher-level occupations in which women's presence has greatly increased. A number of jobs are still over-represented by women, e.g. pre-primary education, nursing, midwifery, secretarial and personal care work, domestic work, etc. Against this background, gender-segregated education systems and workplaces remain a major issue in moving towards more inclusive and innovative societies.

Achieving economic independence is more challenging for women with lower qualifications. The lower the educational level, the lower the full time equivalent employment rate and the higher the gender gap. The labour market participation rate of women with low levels of qualifications is only half the participation rate of low-qualified men (17% and 34% respectively). At the same time, low levels of qualifications imply higher risks of long-term unemployment and precarious employment in terms of low pay, short working hours (up to 10 hours per week) and low job security.

As highlighted by the Gender Equality Index 2017, there are particular challenges in accessing the labour market for women with disabilities, women with children and older women. The intersection of gender and other social factors, such as age, ethnic origin, migrant background, family composition, educational attainment, sexual identity or religion need to be examined and better targeted by policies to address inequalities in the access to the labour market.

Gender equality in decision-making

The efforts to boost gender equality in decision-making in the last decades have achieved some notable results. Nevertheless, the over-representation of men in positions of power in economic, political and social domains still persists in all Member States.

Progress in gender-balanced decision-making structures is most pronounced on corporate boards where the proportion of women more than doubled from 10% in 2005 to 25% in 2017. The majority of the progress occurred in a limited number of Member States, principally as a result of legislative measures to promote gender balance. Greater representation of women on company boards is seriously hampered by the lack of transparency in the selection of directors and the persistence of gender stereotypes in corporate culture, which shape the way leadership and those holding positions of power are perceived. These perceptions are reflected in the institutional culture where formal and informal practices work to the advantage of men.

Progress in financial decision-making is less promising. Numerically, men dominate in central banks and finance ministries. In 2016, Central Banks across the EU were almost entirely led by men. Of the 28 central bank governors, only one was a woman; and there were only two women finance ministers at the Member State level.

On average, in the EU the number of women holding positions in national parliaments has been gradually increasing over the last ten years, from 21 % in 2005 to 29 % in 2017. As regards gender balance in executive power, the share of women among senior ministers increased from 22 % in 2005 to 29 % in 2017. Regional assemblies followed the overall national trend of steady progress, with women's representation slowly increasing from 29 % in 2005 to 33 % in 2017. The under-representation of women is most pronounced in the top leadership of these assemblies. Three times as many men as women act as speakers of national parliaments (in single and lower houses), nearly four times more men than women

lead regional assemblies and six times as many men lead local/ municipal councils. The progress at all levels of political decision-making is far too slow (EIGE, 2017).

A look past the numbers shows that gender imbalance is further reflected in the division of ministers' portfolios. Women dominate ministries with socio-cultural functions (41 % of portfolios), reinforcing traditional stereotypes about women's roles and expertise, while men tend to be assigned to higher-status and more traditionally 'masculine' areas such as foreign affairs, finance and defence.

Gender imbalance is also common in other areas of public life: academia, media or sports. Data on gender equality in research indicates that, despite similar proportions of women and men amongst graduates and post-graduates, representation is skewed towards men amongst researchers and, in particular, in the highest decision-making bodies of research performing and research funding institutions. In 2017, women accounted for 40 % of members, but only 30 % of heads of decision-making bodies of research funding organisations in the EU (EIGE, 2017).

In the media, though nearly two-thirds of journalism graduates are women, few tend to advance to senior posts compared to men. Only one-third of board memberships of public broadcasters across the EU are held by women. A positive trend has been noted where the percentage of women holding board seats went up from 30 % in 2014 to 35 % in 2016. Nevertheless, like in other areas, women are heavily under-represented at the top-level positions, accounting only for 27 % of board presidents. Women are also underrepresented by the media, both in journalists' lists of sources, and through stereotyping in the subjects women are typically asked to comment on.

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