



erechos fundamentales  
Основни права  
Cearta bunúsacha  
Grundläggande rättigheter

Grondrechten  
Direitos fundamentais  
Temeljne pravice  
Alapvető jogok

Pamattiesības  
Základné práva  
Prawa podstawowe  
Droits fondamentaux  
Gründlæggende rettigheder

Pagrindinés teisés  
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Temeljna prava  
Perusoikeudet  
Colloquium  
Základní práva

**Fundamental rights**

**Annual Colloquium on Fundamental Rights 2017**  
**"Women's Rights in Turbulent Times"**  
**Brussels, 20-21 November 2017**

Concept paper by the European Commission and the European Institute for Gender Equality

Session II.b: Engendering democracy: women in the political process

## **Aim of the session**

The aim of the discussion will be to reflect broadly on female participation in the political process and methods to ensure women not only have equal opportunities to enter political bodies, but also to participate in the political debate, to be able to influence the content of policies and practices, and to have their interests taken into account.

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?
- What could be done, in addition to implementing traditional measures such as quotas, to address women's underrepresentation in the public debate, acknowledging the complexity and multidimensionality of the issue?
- How can women, especially the next generation of talented women, be encouraged to run for political office?
- As political parties evolve to a changing political landscape, what measures can be taken to increase female participation?

## **Background**

This paper addresses the legitimacy of democracies vis-à-vis the low level of representation of women in politics.

The underrepresentation of women in European politics is evident at all levels of decision making positions. On average, in the EU the number of women holding positions in the 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. Men tend to be designated to higher-status and more traditionally 'masculine' areas such as foreign affairs, finance and defence.

Women account for only 37% of MEPs and for 9 out of 28 Commissioners. At the beginning of his mandate as President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker stated that "Gender balance is not a luxury but a political must (...) I had to fight to get the national governments to put forward nine female members.(...) But in all honesty, nine women out of 28 Commissioners is still ridiculously low" (European Commission, 2014).

Věra Jourová, Commissioner for Justice and Consumers, is also very committed to the equal participation of women in political decision-making: "Political parties have the primary responsibility for ensuring that women come forward to represent them and that they are put in positions from which they can win seats. They need to engage in stronger actions to attract and retain women at all levels." (The Parliament Magazine, 2017).

Women are also largely absent from public democratic debate and positions of power as shown in EIGE's 2017 Gender Equality Index. In this context, it is unsurprising that turnout at the 2014 European Parliament elections was lower among women. Turnout was 41% for women and 45% for men. This gap has widened compared to the previous elections in 2009 when the turnout was 42% for women against 44% for men (European Commission, 2015).

There is recognition of the importance of this issue in Europe: a large majority of Europeans are in favour of measures to ensure parity between men and women in politics (Eurobarometer, 2018 forthcoming). The aim of the discussion will be to reflect broadly on female participation in the political process and methods to ensure women not only have equal opportunities to enter political bodies, but also to participate in the political debate, to be able to influence the content of policies and practices, and to have their interests taken into account.

There are multiple factors contributing to gender imbalances in political power and decision-making. Women are not a homogenous group; there are numerous factors limiting women's opportunities in the wider social "influencing" space and the public democratic debate. Socioeconomics as well as other demographic characteristics have to be considered to include women in all situations (e.g. single mothers, women in poverty, migrant women). Infrastructures have to be adapted in order to cater to the specific needs of various groups of women (e.g. sitting hours in councils and parliaments; childcare facilities). Women in Europe are more likely than men to live in poverty and have been affected more acutely by the fallout of the financial crisis with respect to the cuts in social provision and government services.

The deeply entrenched vertical segregation by gender in many public sector organisations shows that invisible barriers (social structures, gender roles, prejudices and stereotypes) play a key role, allowing women to progress only to a certain point in their careers. Hence, there is a persistent problem that the highest positions often seem to be out of reach for most women.

In general, the space for debate can be hostile to women, often shaped by sexist attitudes and structures in social and traditional media. Journalists, bloggers and activists are frequently victims of violence and hate speech online and offline. Female politicians experience a double burden created by their public status as well as their gender, while human rights defenders are more often attacked when they are women (Council of Europe, 2016).

Institutional factors also play a role. The design of electoral systems, internal policies and practices of political parties are also factors of gender imbalance. Some examples are the lack of political party support for female candidates, limited financial support and limited access to political networks; male-oriented norms and structures that hinder women's public participation, including parliamentary schedules that are difficult to reconcile with parental and family responsibilities; electoral systems such as first-past-the-post rather than proportional representation systems (SIDA, 1998). All the above make the need to ensure women's political participation all the more acute.

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