

Gender Equality Review Conference

On Occasion of the 10th Anniversary of the 2004 OSCE Gender Action Plan

Date: 10-11 July, 2014

Venue: Neuer Saal, Hofburg, Vienna

On behalf of the European Centre of the International Council of Women and the National Council of Women of Malta I welcome the importance given to Women in Political Decision Making.

Gender balance in political decision making is a stated goal of the OSCE as this is the basis of democracy. Recommendation for the introduction of legislated, regulatory and incentive measures to redress the under-representation of women in decision making have been recognized in a number of international standards and commitments that the OSCE participating States have pledged to.

Starting in 1975 in Helsinki, OSCE emphasized human rights for *all* without distinction as to sex. In 1991, gender equality was recognized as a *fundamental aspect of a democratic society*. In 2004, *effective measures* for equal participation in democratic processes were considered. And so these commitments *evolved* and became more *specific*; the 2009 MC Decision 7/09 recognizes political parties as the key actors responsible for advancing women's role in politics.

And here we are in 2014, four decades later, still discussing the same issue. We may want to ask ourselves *how well we did with fulfilling* these commitments? What are the achievements, challenges and ways forward to advance women's political participation in OSCE region?

Looking at the 57 OSCE participating States, we see that the current representation of women stands at an average of about 25 percent. Some States have made progress in empowering women such as those who have 50 per cent women in their parliaments, achieving parity - but others are below 10 percent.

Overall, the average is below the UN Beijing target of 30 percent and below the CoE recommendation of a minimum of 40% women in decision-making positions.

While Countries like Malta as members of the Commonwealth have the Commonwealth Gender Plan of Action for Gender Equality (2005-2015) which has a target 30% Women in Parliament to implement, yet we are far behind these targets.

ODIHR's Study on *Gender Equality in Elected Office* shows that if we continue progressing on the same rate and without serious interventions, gender parity will be achieved in the OSCE region in 50 years.

So, what can we do?

Constitutional rights shall guarantee equal rights for women and men to access the ballot and stand for office.

Electoral legislation should ensure equal opportunities for fair political competition not only among political parties, but also between men and women candidates.

Should we consider Legal quotas? Evidence shows that all together over the last decade, countries which have introduced legal gender quotas have double the progress in terms of women getting elected than the countries without the quotas. But, quotas are only as effective as their formulation. WE must ensure that these quotas are not only a piece of paper, but that they are effective and implemented.

Most importantly, we must look at political parties?

Political parties are the “gatekeepers” of democracy, and have a special role to represent citizen’s interests in the political process, interests of both women and men.

When assessing the democratic functioning of political parties, we should ask how many women are on party selection, nomination commissions and whether selection procedures for candidacy are formally written down, transparent and fair. How are parties recruiting and nominating candidates, party leaders, campaign managers? Parties should look at their rules for allocating party resources, such as money, access to party property, airtime, and whether those resources are allocated fairly to women and men candidates?

Organisations like the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights should work with political parties and parliaments to make sure that they properly promote women’s participation in politics. It seems that our Maltese Parliament and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights are planning a high-level conference on this topic to be held in Valletta in the fall, and we, as civil society, will support this initiative with all our expertise.

When talking about women in politics, some argue that this may lead to compromising the quality of elected office. We should absolutely evaluate the skills, capacities and merit in politics, because we want the best people to represent us, but this should by no means turn into a screening process of women only. WE can always work on strengthening the capacities of women and men, but this discussion should scrutinize women and men politicians on an equal footing.

Parliaments should mainstream gender into their policy work, priorities, and budgets. Just like in political parties, the procedures for appointments to parliamentary committees must be transparent and gender balanced, so that women are nominated as chairs of parliamentary committees on an equal footing, and not only in traditional women areas. Parliaments should alter their working conditions and cultures. Issues such as working hours, childcare facilities, and parental leave can generate obstacles to the equal inclusion of women and men in decision making and leadership roles within parliaments, these obstacles should be addressed.

Parliaments should also consider establishing cross-party caucuses of women parliamentarians as a way to strengthen women’s role in decision-making and in parliaments. There is a very useful study called *Comparative Structures for women MPs*, which provides guidance on how to establish such structures. I recommend it.

Thank You

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