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NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject: Women in public life
- *Policy debate*

Delegations will find attached a steering note prepared by the Presidency, with a view to the policy debate on the above subject at the EPSCO Council on 7 May 2024.

Women in public life

Policy debate

Improving women's representation in decision-making

Gender equality is a human right and a fundamental principle of the EU enshrined in the Treaties and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. The goal is a Union of Equality where women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, are free to pursue their chosen path in life, have equal opportunities to thrive, and can equally participate in and lead our European society.

As a result of enhanced political commitment in this area, the European Commission is leading by example with the first ever gender equal College of Commissioners and the first Commissioner responsible for Equality. Notable progress by all EU institutions has been achieved during the current mandate through legislative initiatives aimed at fostering gender equality in all dimensions. It is imperative that democratic processes and political parties in their structures follow up on these advances, are inclusive and reflect the diversity of European society.

However, despite long lasting efforts and undeniable progress, women are still under-represented at most levels of political decision-making and in other areas of public life, particularly in ministerial and other executive positions. When looking at the European Union data, provided by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), on average, women make up 39.5% of members in the European Parliament and 32,8% of members of national parliaments in EU Member States are women, with large geographical disparities. On average, women represent only 32.9% of senior ministers and occupy only 35.7% of the members of regional assemblies. Full parity or gender balance in political representation exists in only a handful of EU Member States.

Moreover, the data is much less encouraging when looking specifically at gender balance within parliaments and local and regional councils in terms of presidents, chairpersons of parliamentary bodies or key non-elected positions. There is still gender segregation of ministers' portfolios and membership of parliamentary working bodies, with traditionally male-dominated ones (defence, finance) and those with a higher proportion of women (social policy, education) strongly correlated with legislative and budgetary impact, to the advantage of male-dominated policies.

From an intersectional perspective, the figures on the participation of ethnic minority women, LGBTQIA+ persons or women with disabilities are incomplete, nevertheless indicating very low proportions, thus indicating limited representation of minority groups and their perspectives.

Obstacles to women's equal representation in political and executive positions

Women in political decision-making face obstacles that are embedded within different cultural, economic and political contexts and electoral systems.

Firstly, there are **well-known longstanding obstacles that continue to prevent or discourage women from entering political decision-making positions**, such as:

- Gender stereotypes and gender biases embedded in the general culture continuing to negatively impact women. The upbringing of boys and girls and the negative stereotypes of women and men, including in the media further limit women's interest and career aspirations to positions of power during their careers.
- A male-dominated political culture in parties and political institutions. The way political parties, as gatekeepers to political office, are organised, for example in terms of recruitment, admission and selection procedures, has a negative impact on women's opportunities to enter leadership positions.
- The issue of care and work-life balance. Many women leaders face overwhelming workloads and time demands, while the responsibility for domestic work and care of children and older persons is still unequally distributed.

- Unequal allocation of key resources such as time, financial means and political networks.
- Political systems themselves may constitute a potential institutional barrier. Majority systems are less effective in promoting the election of female candidates than political systems that are based entirely on proportional representation, or that include an element of proportional representation.
- Media coverage of women politicians and leaders is still gender biased, with women politicians receiving significantly less attention (17% less than men) while the coverage often reflects gender stereotypes (Van der Pas & Aldering 2020).
- The lack of female role models resulting from the abovementioned barriers.

Secondly, **new, challenging obstacles have occurred that prevent women from staying in political decision-making positions or force them to leave prematurely**, in particular:

- Violence and harassment against women politicians, but also against other women in leadership positions, has a chilling effect on all women considering a career in public life. Many women politicians and leaders leave before the end of their term or do not stay in power for long.
- The level of abuse and violence disproportionately directed at women in politics and public life simply because they are women is a growing concern. While men primarily experience more general and political abuse, women politicians face experience abuse motivated by their gender identity, with ethnic minority female politicians receiving the highest levels of abuse.
- The testimonies of current and former female politicians who have spoken out, in the wake of the #MeToo movement, about their personal experiences of sexual harassment are another concern. There is still a dearth of internal safeguards against sexism, harassment and sexual harassment, and effective reporting and accountability within parties and parliaments. Women candidates and parliamentarians report also lack of support and inter-partisan solidarity when receiving abuse.

- Research shows that female politicians are attacked up to three times more than male politicians, particularly online (Daniele, Dipoppa, Pulejo, 2023). Violence against women in decision-making positions is widespread and has increasingly moved into the virtual world, including new forms such as computer-generated nude images and videos without consent (deepfake intimate images, cyber flashing) or online stalking. However, while online violence is already highly intimidating and traumatising, it can also precede offline violence, leading in extreme cases - such as the murder of MP Jo Cox in the UK - to femicide. LGBTQIA+ and minority candidates are also disproportionately targeted.

Mechanisms for promoting gender equality in political positions

The underrepresentation of women in decision-making is a multifaceted issue. The measures that need to be taken do not only concern the electoral system or political parties but are broader in scope, including also work-life balance policies and policies to combat gender-based violence, to support a more equal distribution of caring and domestic responsibilities and to overcome gender stereotypes. Studies also show that in order to increase and secure the presence of women in power and make full use of their talents, there is a need to create an inclusive environment for all, including women from disadvantaged groups. As recalled by the Commission’s Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, women are a heterogeneous group and may face intersectional discrimination based on several characteristics.¹ For example, women with disabilities frequently encounter challenges in exercising their rights, including participation in elections and engagement in political and decision-making processes.

¹ According to Article 10 TFEU, when “defining and implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall aim to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation”.

The Gender Equality Strategy also recalled the importance of equal opportunities for participation as essential for representative democracy at all levels. The Commission committed itself to promoting the participation of women as voters and candidates in the 2024 European Parliament elections, in cooperation with the European Parliament and national parliaments, Member States and civil society, including through funding and the promotion of best practices. The Commission also made specific commitments regarding senior positions in its administration and to support Member States in developing and implementing more effective strategies to increase the number of women in decision-making positions.

Concerning the broader issue of making working environments more inclusive, flexible working arrangements for parents and carers are provided for in the Work-life Balance Directive 2019/1158, alongside Directive 2006/54/EC on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation also, which provided for increased protection against discrimination based on gender.

The 2023 Commission Recommendation on inclusive and resilient electoral processes contains recommendations on gender equality and identifies a number of relevant measures addressed to Member States.

The recently adopted Digital Services Act and the upcoming Violence against Women Directive aim to better protect users by safeguarding fundamental rights online, establishing a powerful transparency and accountability framework for online platforms and providing a single, uniform framework across the EU. It obliges inter alia large online platforms to take effective mitigation measures to address systemic risks, including in respect of illegal hate speech or cyber violence against women. The so-called Anti-Slapp directive aims to better protect politicians, journalist, activists and others from the threat of unfounded and abusive legal actions to silence those working in the public interest.

With the recent agreement on the directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, Member States will be required to put in place new tools to fight violence and hate speech against women offline and online with an important role to be played by the online platforms.

Next year, the 30th anniversary of the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action for Women, Development and Peace (BpfA) will be celebrated. The Beijing Platform recalls that equality in decision-making is essential for the empowerment of women. In addition, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW Convention) establishes the right to participate in public and political life, with the obligation to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life and to ensure that women, on equal terms with men, have the right to vote and to stand for election, to participate in public affairs, to hold public office and functions, and to participate in relevant civil society activities.

This debate will provide an opportunity to discuss the mechanisms and measures needed to promote gender equality in decision-making at the EU and national level. These could include institutional and structural measures at national level, such as reforms of electoral systems, binding or voluntary party quotas, gender balance in governing bodies of electoral management bodies, linking the allocation of public funding for political parties to gender parity, redefining work structures, and promoting gender mainstreaming including better data collection, but also training, mentoring, funding and other support for women candidates, particularly young women and women from underrepresented minority groups. In view of the sexism, harassment and violence to which female politicians in particular are subjected, attention should be paid to measures to combat gender stereotypes, hate speech and harassment offline and online.

In the context of the forthcoming European Parliament elections, and as part of its efforts to improve the visibility of gender equality policy in the Council, the Belgian Presidency is putting this topic forward for discussion and exchange of experiences and best practices, with a view to ensuring a safe and equal environment for women in public life.

Against this background, Ministers are invited to hold a policy debate on the following questions:

- 1. Which strategies and mechanisms at national level did your country develop to enhance women's representation in decision-making and foster gender equality in leadership roles?*
- 2. What initiatives can be taken at the EU level to achieve the aforementioned objective?*