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by Cristina Barbeta

WOMEN. No quotas? No equality

21 September 2010

The EC's gender equality strategy starts today. But will equality in the workplace happen without quotas?

The European Commission has adopted a five-year strategy for promoting equality between women and men in Europe.

The strategy translates the principles set out by the Commission in its Women's Charter, which was adopted in March 2010, into specific actions to ensure that women and men are treated equally at work and at home. Key issues are considered to be equal pay, getting women into the boardrooms and preventing gender violence.

The Commission's strategy for 2010-2015 was presented by Viviane Reding, Vice-President and EU Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship, during a press conference in Strasbourg this morning. She also presented the results of a new Euro Barometer survey on attitudes to domestic violence in Europe.

According to the survey 87% of Europeans support EU action to tackle domestic violence and one out of four Europeans know someone who has been a victim of such violence.

On the eve of the strategy's adoption, Vita Europe interviewed Béatrice Castellane, a lawyer at the Paris Bar with over 20 years experience working to promote the participation of women to decision making processes. Castellane is also an international arbitrator and President of the French Association of Women Lawyers.

How present are women in Europe's political life?

When it comes to the number of women elected in parliaments, European countries do well: of the ten countries that score highest in terms of women in parliament, six are European. Four are members of the EU, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Holland, and the other two are Norway and Iceland.

Why do fewer men than women get the decision making jobs?

Sometimes because when women are faced with the choice, they choose their families over their careers, especially when they have young children. Where there are big economic interests involved it is more likely that women will be discriminated against, the Paris Bar Association is a good example. Although it has existed since the 19th century, and 50% of its lawyers are women, only one woman has ever been elected as president. In two hundred and twenty years, only one woman!

Where in Europe are women most discriminated against?

The situation is much more difficult in the south than in the north, where there is an overall more 'macho' culture and where although it is accepted that women work, they are also expected to look after the house and children. North European women say women in the south are not combative enough; they don't fight to change their culture. In the east of Europe however the situation is better, in fact it is safe to say that socialist systems tend to favour gender equality.

Gender quota systems oblige employers to ensure that a given percentage of their staff is female. Do you think they are a good idea?

Yes. Quota systems have been proven to be a success and their effectiveness doesn't need to be questioned anymore, they should be a legal obligation. Look at how important they were to racial equality in America. Without gender quotas, if we just sit and wait for women to have decisional power we won't advance, and we won't change society.

Where has the gender quota system worked well?

In 2004, in Norway, an all-male government of ministers passed a gender quota law obliging all boards of directors to have 40 % women.

Before the law they had already good results, because they had 24-25% of women in the boards. Now with the law they have 42% of women.

But doesn't the quota system risk being discriminatory towards men?

No, not really. What happens today is that women feel guilty about taking seats; they think they are stealing them from men. With the quotas there are no problems – everyone knows how many seats there are for men and how many for women. It also makes it easier for men to accept women in positions of power.

Surely though quotas aren't the only answer to gender equality as you can't put gender quotas on every aspect of society....

We have to act on two fronts: establish the quota system and change the culture, first of all by changing education, both for girls and for boys. Creating role models for women is also important. Not all European women have mothers and grandmothers who have worked and who can stimulate them to having a professional life.

What other strategies do you suggest to promote gender equality in decision-making processes?

It is important that women be given good advice when planning their careers, that they choose paths that enable them to be promoted to higher positions. Often, women don't feel up to having important jobs, they need help and support. Lobbying is another important strategy. Often women avoid confrontation, preferring to wait for opportunities to come their way. But fighting and discussion are important too. Finally, there is training. For a long time now, women in the north of Europe have been trained to deal with power. Women everywhere should have access to this kind of training.

What about flexible working hours?

In France when women ask for flexible hours they are met with surprise and hostility. Men too would like their timetables to be more flexible but no one - man or woman- dares to ask because as a concept it is still not widely accepted. On the other hand, in Norway flexibility in the workplace is very common, both for women and for men.

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