Marking the Centenary of International Women’s Day: How to Achieve Transformation in Europe?

Keynote Address by Mary Robinson
European Parliament
Brussels, 3 March 2011

I am honoured to have been invited to deliver a keynote address to the European Parliament on a subject close to all our hearts: the political empowerment and equal representation of women at all levels in the European Union. The event is special this year, as women worldwide gather to mark the 100th Anniversary of International Women’s Day, 8th March. So let me begin by casting the net a little wider than Europe, to encourage us, over the coming days, to find ways to join hands globally with our sisters around the world.

On 8th March last year I joined hundreds of women, and some supportive men, as we walked together across Brooklyn Bridge in New York, linking with thousands of women on bridges in more than a hundred cities and locations worldwide. The event was organised by Zainab Salbi of Women for Women International and a number of women’s organizations and international NGOs. They plan an even bigger link of women and men on bridges on 8th March throughout the world, in solidarity and sisterhood to mark the centenary. I hope that some members of the European Parliament and national parliaments in
Europe will find a bridge to walk across with others next Tuesday, preferably singing as you go!

A centenary is a time to think back as well as plan forward. In 1993, I was honoured to pay a special visit to New Zealand on the occasion of that country celebrating being the first country in the world to give the parliamentary vote to women in 1893. While I am proud to say that the key figure in initiating the legislation was an Irishman, John Ballance from Ulster, the real power came from the women of New Zealand who had cycled for hundreds of miles along the mountainous roads of the two islands, collecting signatures for the campaign. Interestingly they saw the campaign as part of their struggle to curb the drinking habits of their menfolk. We are each familiar with the struggles for voting rights for women in our different European countries at the beginning of the twentieth century, and later the struggle for the right to stand for parliament.

In some parts of the world these struggles are more recent, and ongoing. Women in Kuwait did not become enfranchised until 2005, and women in the Arab region continue to struggle to stand for parliament and for cabinet posts. This may change, more rapidly, as it is notable how many women – particularly young women – have been coming on to the streets in Arab countries despite the violence against them, demanding greater freedom, participation and respect for their human rights. This popular movement, which is different in each country, could have a transformative impact if women are enabled to participate fully and
equally in new constitutional and legal structures in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and perhaps others.

Women’s empowerment is in fact a cornerstone of democratic growth in the Arab world. This is because when women are able to participate in parliament they raise issues that others overlook. Once there is a critical mass of women members, they change the priorities, devote energies to projects that others neglected, reach out to constituencies that have been marginalized and ignored. Womens involvement in government makes them more representative, responsive and accountable, and better able to reach across ethnic, racial and religious lines. And we must not confuse the terms Arab and Islam.

Members of the European Parliament should do all they can to support the peaceful transition to democracy that is being led by young women and men in countries of the Arab world, whether Islamic or not, and to speak out against violence used to suppress peaceful protests. It is in the interests of all to do so. Unfortunately, as I noted at a conference in Paris last week on the issue of Women against Fundamentalism and for Equality:

“There is a notable trend in European countries towards Islamophobia, some of it exploited for political short term gains. So we need to have open discussion on fundamentalism such as this, particularly about the impact on women.”

We must have no “Islamic Feminists” just as we don’t have “Jewish Feminists” or “Christian Feminists” – but we must be respectful of each other’s cultural background and heritage. And I do believe Members of
this Parliament and in particular women members can show leadership in this arena which is as important in their own constituencies as it is in the Arab world.

And there can be significant change in relatively short periods. That allows me say what gives me particular hope, is that I have witnessed the transformative impact of women’s empowerment in two countries, Rwanda and Liberia. I was the first head of state to visit Rwanda after the genocidal killing there in 1994, and I returned again in 1995 in order to bring the suffering of the Rwandan people to the UN during its 50th anniversary events. The aftermath of genocide is a horrific experience, with churches full of human bones and bundles of clothing and shoes, many of them belonging to children who had been massacred. But even in that horrendous scene there was one very beautiful image. In many of the church grounds shrubs were in full bloom with the most beautiful flowers in vivid pinks and reds – and with wonderful scents. One of the NGOs accompanying me explained that was because the ground had received a tremendous amount of one of the best fertilizers – human blood.

My third visit to Rwanda as President took place less than three years after the genocidal killing - in March 1997. It was to attend a Pan African Women’s Conference in Kigali; organised largely by the widows who had managed to survive and cope with their trauma. That conference set Rwanda on a path of commitment to empower women at every level, to amend discriminatory land and inheritance laws, and to encourage women to train for public life and stand as candidates in elections at all levels. The results are very positive for Rwanda’s
economic and social development, and it now holds the proud record of having the largest percentage of women in parliament in the world. In a strange way the flowers have bloomed again.

Liberia’s transformation began with the women activists there becoming impatient at the slow pace of peace talks being carried out by male negotiators on all sides. They surrounded them in the venue of the peace talks, insisting on an agreement being reached – a dramatic example of women power captured by Abby Disney in her documentary “Pray the Devil Back to Hell”. The election there in 2005 of the first woman President of an African country, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, resulted in a leadership drive to empower the women of Liberia, using UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, as an organizing tool. An international conference in Liberia on 8-9th March 2009, co-hosted by the presidents of Liberia and Finland, celebrated the progress made to date and established the Angie Brooks Centre for women’s empowerment to carry the work forward. Michelle Bachelet, Executive Director of the recently established UN Women, has chosen to be in Monrovia for her first international women’s day in that post, recognizing that Liberia under President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is giving leadership on women’s empowerment and equality.

This brings to mind an op-ed I co-authored some time ago with Kofi Annan, Jimmy Carter and Graça Machel:

“As members of the Elders, a group who came together … under Nelson’s Mandela’s inspiration and Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s
chairmanship to speak freely on global issues, we want to reaffirm the importance of promoting women’s leadership, and highlight the ongoing urgent need to protect the human rights of women. We welcome the fact that today a growing number of women hold positions of political authority around the world….

But for countless millions of women and girls, there is little that we can celebrate. The situations they find themselves in are truly intolerable. Women make up most of the world’s poor. Gender based violence and systemic discrimination against women continue in many countries around the world. Women are particularly at risk in most conflict situations, and maternal mortality and HIVAIDS’ rates for women are worsening. Adolescent girls are especially vulnerable, and empowering them is key to tackling these challenges. Young girls are often overlooked in efforts to help poor communities despite the fact that they have tremendous impact on household survival and how societies function.”

Unfortunately these concerns will remain valid for many years to come but I know they are being addressed in Monrovia this week.

So where does this leave women’s political empowerment in EU countries? Of course, there has been steady progress over the decades in equal treatment legislation, with landmark cases of the European Court of Justice and national courts, and initiatives by the European Parliament itself. I would like to pay tribute to the work of the Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality. Its report on
Equality between Women and Men in the European Union – 2010 (2010/2138 (INI)) sights many of the earlier initiatives, including the resolution on 13th March 2007 on a Roadmap for Equality between Women and Men (2006-2010). The report comes up with 26 points, of which the first 14 relate to issues of female employment and equality in pay and conditions. Point 15, however, is rather weak: “Welcomes efforts made at European level to increase women’s representation in politics; advocates, therefore, greater participation for women in all European institutions, particularly in positions of responsibility; stresses, however, that further efforts must be made at national, regional and municipal level”. The report notes that “only 3% of major companies are chaired by a woman”, and calls on member states and the Commission to pay particular attention to vulnerable groups of women – it refers in particular to women with disabilities and Roma women. Reading the report, I was struck by the fact that “all the right buttons were being pressed”, but that it had the air of a “button pressing” exercise! It was adopted by 22 votes in favour, 2 against, and which I understand will be put to a plenary vote next week.

Let me summarise the value of women’s representation by quoting a passage from a recent report of National Democratic Institute (NDI) on Democracy and the Challenges of Change. A guide to increasing women’s political participation. The report draws on case studies around the world, and long experience in training women for democracy, and puts the case in this way:
“Women’s participation in politics helps advance gender equality and affects both the range of policy issues that are considered and the types of solutions that are proposed. There is strong evidence that as more women are elected to office, there is an increase in policy making that emphasises quality of life and reflects the priorities of families, women, and ethnic and racial minorities. Women’s political participation has profound, positive and democratic impacts on communities, legislatures, political parties, and citizens’ lives, and helps democracy deliver.

- When women are empowered as political leaders, countries experience higher standards of living. Positive developments can be seen in education, infrastructure and health, and concrete steps are taken to help make democracy more effective.

- Women’s presence in politics ensures that the concerns of women and other marginalized voters are represented and helps improve the responsiveness of policy making and governance.

- Women’s leadership and conflict resolution styles embody democratic ideals and women tend to work in a less hierarchical and more collaborative way than male colleagues. Women are also more likely to work across party lines, even in highly partisan environments.

- Women lawmakers see government as a tool to help serve under represented or minority groups. Women lawmakers, therefore,
Women are deeply committed to peace building and post conflict reconstruction and have a unique and powerful perspective to bring to the negotiating table. Women suffer disproportionally during armed conflict and often advocate most strongly for stabilisation, reconstruction and for the prevention of future conflict.

In order to meet worldwide development goals and build strong, sustainable democracies, women must be encouraged, empowered and supported in becoming strong, political and community leaders.”

This being the case, why is women’s participation at the political level in Europe faltering? While 10 countries in the EU have over 27% proportion of women in the lower house of parliament, led by Sweden at 45%, the majority – including my own country – are below 23% and two countries are down to less than 10% of women members. Clearly the traditional barriers remain strong enough to deter or defeat women candidates: lack of adequate financial resources, disproportionate family obligations, lack of confidence in a predominantly male culture, a preference of many women to serve in civil society organisations where the culture is more friendly and gender sensitive. The media coverage of decisions in the recent past by Licia Ronzulli and Rachida Dati,
members of this Parliament, show clearly the very real obstacles faced by many women in managing family and political life.

Are we in Europe prepared to really tackle these and other barriers over a ten-year transformative period? Are countries prepared to introduce national quotas for local and parliamentary elections for a decade to correct the existing imbalance? Are the EU and national governments prepared to provide financial resources to train and resource women candidates at local, national and EU level? Are national parliaments willing to adapt their procedures to enable women members to have a better work life balance? Are political parties in EU countries interested to explore how to change their predominantly male ethos to attract women members? Are women themselves, prepared to accept the responsibility of giving leadership, and coming forward with a vision of how the European Union can close the current democratic deficit gap?

These are some of the questions the marking of a centenary prompts us to consider. The wider political, economic, social and climate change challenges facing Europe require the injection of new vitality and leadership.

While we must be optimistic we must also be realistic. In 2008 the UK’s Equality and Human Rights Commission published the report, Sex and Power and inter alia stated that:

“A snail could crawl the entire length of the Great Wall of China in 212 years, just slightly longer than the 200 years it will take for women to be equally represented in Parliament.”
We don’t need slow incremental or snail’s pace change, we need transformative change if we are going to address these problems effectively.

Thank you.

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