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QUALITATIVE SURVEY

Women and the European Union, following the European elections in June 2009.

Covering: EU 27

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In addition to the pre-and post-election quantitative surveys¹ and the analysis of the vote by gender², a qualitative survey was conducted in each Member State among a group of women aged from 30 to 55. This study aims to assess the way they see the situation of women in their country, and also to gain a better understanding of their perception of the EU, their experience of the financial, economic and social crisis, and of how women voted in the June 2009 election.

A qualitative survey is not intended to be representative of the population it studies, which in this case was European women. Its purpose is to analyse in depth the concerns, perceptions and views of a very specific target population and to understand the way they think about a subject, and it can thus be useful for taking specific action targeted towards that public.

It is a very difficult and delicate task to produce a global summary of the information gathered in these discussion groups held in all the Member States. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish some major trends common to all countries and some geographical groupings, which necessarily entail a certain amount of generalisation and do not systematically take account of the complexity of points of view and thought processes leading to those views which the participants expressed. It is far from perfect, but this summary nevertheless has the merit of highlighting some main trends which are common to the countries in a particular group and of identifying their differences which are sometimes very clear.

The summary below is structured to take account of this analysis by groupings of countries, as follows.

I - Attitudes common to all European women

II - Pre-2004 countries: the Nordic and Continental countries (DK, FI, SE, DE, AT, LU, NL, BE, FR)

III - Pre-2004 countries: United Kingdom and Ireland

IV - Pre-2004 countries: the Southern countries (EL, IT, PT, ES, including MT and CY)

V - Post-2004 countries: the Eastern countries (BG, CZ, EE, HU, LV, LT, PL, RO, SK, SI)

¹ EB Standard reports 2008 (EB70) and 2009 (EB71)

² Post-election study 2009 (EB71.3) Raw results: focus on proportion of men and women

I. Attitudes common to all European women

The quantitative studies showed that women had a more distant connection with the EU than did men. This qualitative survey makes it possible to go further than that and gain a better understanding of how women relate to politics and the EU.

In general, the qualitative survey shows that European women agree on the following points.

Context of equality between men and women

- Although there are sometimes strong nuances according to country, all women complain that there is still no absolute equality between men and women. There are legal texts proclaiming it, but reality is different, and this applies in all sectors of society.
- In every group of countries the replies are influenced by the **historic, cultural, economic and social heritage**.

General perception of the EU

- There is a view of the EU which may seem paradoxical.
 - On the one hand, women feel that the EU is distant, complex in the way it operates and that its' actions are difficult to understand.
 - On the other hand, without exactly knowing why, they feel that it is powerful, both in its external actions and in its impact on their daily lives. In this age group they describe themselves as the 'Europe generation'. Some of them grew up with the EU and others have been looking forward to it for years.

Women **see the EU as self-evident**; from the symbolic point of view, they welcome the idea of a vast area of peace and mutual assistance, a positive image that contrasts with the bureaucratic reality which the participants see as inaccessible. However, they underline its fundamental role: they are aware that a large proportion of national laws depend in one way or other on the EU and that its principal role is to **harmonise and regulate**.

This awareness is not systematically consistent with approval, and attitudes to the EU vary sometimes distinctly between countries.

- There is a certain amount of disillusionment with the EU.

The EU is mostly misunderstood, but nonetheless it exists and can be a disappointment:

- because of its poor image; in this area, as for all the topics discussed in the discussion groups, the media are often blamed, particularly for:
 - not educating the public,
 - their tendency to favour anecdotes rather than in-depth analysis,
 - their attitude which is too often negative and not constructive;

- because of a lack of communication which makes it seem distant,
- because it is not seen as protecting purchasing power which has been hit by the crisis.

Perception of the crisis

- **During the discussions, all the women said they were concerned or directly affected by the crisis.** Their assessment of the situation varies clearly depending on their country's economic situation; their reactions to the crisis range from vague concern to a feeling of disaster.
- The impact of the crisis is economic and social and also **psychological**. **It is associated with a major element** of moral questioning and a crisis of confidence with regard to politics in general.
- Even more than for the perception of the EU, this study shows that women deplore the **'pernicious' role of the media**. **They often complain of an 'anxiety-inducing' climate** and a lack of information on who is doing what and who is responsible for what.
- **The EU is not thought to be responsible for the situation, but neither is it perceived as being particularly able to put in place a strategy to respond to the crisis.** Once again, women taking part in the discussion groups say they have not received sufficient information to be knowledgeable about its role. They know that the EU 'does something', but what? These European women are not sure that the EU has the capacity to take action.
- On the other hand, most of them point to the **American banking system as being primarily responsible for starting off the crisis**. **But they also consider that national banks and institutions have a major responsibility for managing the crisis.**
- Confronted by this situation, what is apparent is not a feeling of self-absorption but rather a feeling of **wanting to make things happen**, to change the behaviour of the general public. Because they find that institutions have either not responded at all or that their response has been inadequate or inappropriate, the participants want civil society to take over the response to the crisis. For them, the public are part of the solution. They want people to have more civic awareness and behave more responsibly.
- In this context, although to different degrees according to country, the **main preoccupations** of women in the EU are:
 - unemployment (they are in general more concerned about future generations than for themselves);
 - loss of purchasing power and a lower standard of living; in countries that are less affected by the crisis, this is a fear for the future; in those that have borne the full brunt, this is sometimes a distressing reality;
 - stress and a collective unease felt within society because of the uncertainties that weigh on the future.

- Still in this context, they favour political action that takes more account of social, societal and environmental issues.

Interest in and information about politics

- The women say they are **more interested in national and local politics** than in European and international politics, which they consider to be distant and complex.
- Although the women say that it is easier now than in former times to obtain information, they complain that **it is difficult for them to find out about the EU in general and its everyday workings in particular. Often during the discussion they themselves were surprised by how little they knew about the subject. Once more the focus of blame is on the media.**

European elections

- European women aged between 30 and 55 admit that they **know little about European issues**. They feel that the campaigns were based more on national than European issues.
- They confirm that their voting was influenced by local situations and by the way in which their country was affected by the crisis.
- They say that they had little enthusiasm for this election and did not think it was very important.
- Most of those who voted say that they did so out of a **sense of duty**, and that this **required them to make an effort**.
- Those who did not vote say that this was because they had no strong feelings about the election, or that they did not have enough information or that it was impossible for them to get to the polling station.
- They say that they know little about the results of the election.

<p style="text-align: center;">II. Pre-2004 countries Group 1: the Nordic and Continental countries</p>

DK, FI, SE, DE, AT, LU, NL, BE, FR

Context of equality between men and women

- Although equality is firmly rooted in the Nordic and continental countries, parity has still not been achieved in politics, pay or the family. The feeling of equality is, however, stronger in the Nordic countries than in the Continental countries.
- Although the participants in this group of countries recognise that they have not been directly hit by the crisis, they fear that in future the crisis might endanger the balance they have been able to achieve between work and private life.

General perception of the EU

- Women in the Nordic and Continental countries (with the notable exception of Austria) have a relatively positive view of the European institutions in comparison with women in the southern countries.
- The EU has an unfortunate image as being tarnished, distant and incomprehensible.
- Women in the pre-2004 Member States think that the EU's impact is often concerned with aspects such as taxes, relocation, the grading of fruit, etc. However in the Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden and Denmark) they regularly refer to EU's role in environmental matters and combating climate change.
- The EU's power is perceived as limited particularly because of the difficulty of finding common ground between the Member States on certain decisions.

Perception of the crisis

- Depending on the impact of the crisis on their country, women in the Nordic and continental countries express different levels of concern.
- In the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Germany, participants showed a **relatively low level of concern in comparison with the other countries**. They deplore the way the media have made a drama out of the crisis, the gap between rich and poor, consumerism and the danger represented by reduced purchasing power.
- French, Belgian and Luxembourgish participants consider that the **crisis has had a damaging impact** on their country. In fact they said they were more concerned for their country than for themselves. They have become more aware of gaps between rich and poor and, in France, of an increased risk of falling into poverty and of anxiety aroused by the way the media are dramatising the situation.

However, they consider that this is a temporary slowdown in the economy (cyclical aspect of economic crises).

- The Austrians are **very concerned by the situation** and feel frustrated, disappointed and that they are victims of injustice.

Main preoccupations

- The main preoccupations of the women in these countries are:
 - unemployment,
 - education,
 - family,
 - social issues,
 - the environment.

Interest in and information about politics

- There is an interest in politics particularly at local and regional levels.
- With the notable exceptions of Finland and the Netherlands, participants say they are not very well informed.

European elections

- *Why vote and for whom?*
 - Out of a sense of duty,
 - because of encouragement by others (family, colleagues, friends),
 - because of loyalty to a party,
 - for a candidate's manifesto (if it concerns social issues and daily life),
 - in France: to express a protest vote.
- In detail:
 - In **France, the Netherlands and Austria** women tend to vote more out of loyalty to a party than political conviction.
 - In **Germany, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Belgium and Luxembourg** women are more interested in neighbourhood politics (social issues, family and the environment). They tend to vote more out of political conviction than loyalty to a party.

III. Pre-2004 countries Group 2: United Kingdom and Ireland
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Context of equality between men and women

- In the United Kingdom official equality between men and women is just as advanced as in the Nordic and Continental countries. However, some women complain of the breakup of the family unit leading to crime and weakening the social fabric, particularly under the effects of the crisis.
- In Ireland, women complain that their country is lagging behind in equality between men and women with regard to both political representation and pay.

General perception of the EU

- The majority of British participants have a negative view of the EU. They particularly criticise its cumbersome bureaucracy.
- Irish women consider that European politics have little to do with their concerns. Like the British, they have little awareness of its impact on their everyday lives.
- As in the Nordic and Continental countries, the EU has an unfortunate image as being tarnished, distant and incomprehensible.
- Women in the pre-2004 Member States think that the EU's impact is often concerned with aspects such as taxes, relocations, grading of fruit, etc.
- The EU's power is perceived as limited particularly because of the difficulty of finding common ground between the Member States on certain decisions.

Perception of the crisis

- In these two countries women see the situation as dramatic. The crisis brought a fairly good economic situation to an abrupt end, which has caused a great deal of consternation and anxiety.
- For the majority, they see the situation going from bad to worse every day and this provokes strong criticism of the excesses of those working in the financial sector together with a crisis of confidence.
- Their main concern is unemployment, both for themselves and for members of their family.

Interest in and information about politics

- In the United Kingdom women either say they are very interested in politics (out of duty rather than conviction) or not at all interested; Irish participants say they are averagely or not very interested in politics.

European elections

➤ ***Why vote and for whom?***

- To express a protest vote to make an impact on national politics.
- In Ireland women talk about behaviour being influenced by tradition and the family. In the United Kingdom also they mention the role of friends and family.

IV. Pre-2004 countries Group 3: the Southern countries, including MT and CY
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EL, IT, PT, ES, including MT and CY

Context of equality between men and women

These countries in the South of the EU have been hard hit by the crisis, making equality between men and women all the more difficult to achieve.

- In general the South of the EU is lagging behind the North on issues of gender equality (with the notable exception of Cyprus), but these issues tend increasingly to come up in the debate. In this context, Italy and Spain are the most advanced. Laws have changed a lot, particularly in Spain, and egalitarian practices are becoming more widespread in Italy.
- The family unit is important in their lives, particularly in Cyprus and Malta.

General perception of the EU

- In these countries which have been hard hit by the crisis, there is an ambivalent feeling towards the EU. Because of lack of information and the difficulty of understanding the role of the EU, reactions are sometimes negative, sometimes positive and sometimes neutral.
- Apart from the aspects they have in common with the Northern countries mentioned above (the EU's image being vague, complex and tarnished), most of the participants from the Southern countries underline the positive role played by the EU as a regulator. It is globally perceived as a protective and stabilising influence, but it is still difficult to pinpoint what the EU does.
- The participants would like the EU to do more on social policy, particularly to promote balance in the family (crèches, schools, etc.).

Perception of the crisis

- Depending on the impact of the crisis on their country, women in the Southern countries express different levels of concern.
- **The crisis has negative repercussions but only little impact on the daily lives of** participants in discussion groups in Cyprus, Malta and Italy. They are concerned but in reality not much affected by the crisis (or not at all). However, in Cyprus, there is concern for the future of tourism. In Italy and Malta on the other hand, participants stress global insecurity directly linked to immigration.
- In Spain, Greece and Portugal the **participants see the situation as very worrying**. Some countries were already struggling before the crisis. Some respondents see the situation as alarming, others as out of control. The women feel disappointed, frustrated and that they are victims of injustice. Their fears and anxieties in connection with the rise of unemployment are evident in the discussions. Economic insecurity is accompanied by a feeling of insecurity within society.

Interest in and information about politics

- Women in the South of the EU tend to favour neighbourhood and social policy issues. They do not hide their disillusionment with the political world (except in Portugal, where the respondents are more divided), which does not mean that they lack interest in politics in general. In Greece, participants express a lack of confidence in politicians and for that precise reason they feel alienated from politics in general. Once more they underline that it is difficult to find out what they want to know, and complain that information is of poor quality unreliable.

European elections

- The participants were not much interested in the electoral debate, which often had little to do with Europe. Those who did not vote stressed the fact that they did not consider the election either important or useful, which was why they decided not to vote.
- ***Why vote and for whom?***
 - The vast majority said they had decided to vote out of loyalty to a party (except in Italy and Malta).

V. Post-2004 countries: the Eastern countries
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BG, CZ, EE, HU, LV, LT, PL, RO, SK, SI

Context of equality between men and women

- In the Eastern countries they say that the principle of equality was often established there before it was in the other Member States, but that it is less and less borne out by reality.
- There are very different national situations: Estonia and Latvia, for example, are very close to the egalitarian behaviour of the Nordic countries. In contrast, Romania is socially very unequal and women are often the first to suffer. In the other countries women raise issues of inequality particularly economic inequality.
- It seems that they would like the EU to play a greater role with regard to equality between men and women.
- In several countries (Poland, Hungary, and Slovenia to a lesser extent) participants complained of a great lack of social assistance structures (crèches, maternity leave, etc).

General perception of the EU

- As in other countries, there is a dual perception of the EU: women in the Eastern countries express a lot of hope but also doubts.
 - *Positive aspects*: among other issues, free movement and solidarity within the Community are frequently mentioned.

In their eyes, the EU is a factor for progress and development, economic opportunities, infrastructure development and access to technologies.

- *Negative aspects*: its tarnished image (distance, cumbersome bureaucracy) and the loss of a certain amount of social security; in the Czech Republic and to a lesser extent in Poland, the undermining of national sovereignty; there is relatively strong criticism of the CAP in Romania and Slovakia.

Women in this group of countries say they have no real knowledge of the EU's impact: they often know that the EU has been responsible for sending money to their country but do not know exactly how this has been arranged.

Perception of the crisis

- Depending on the impact of the crisis on their country, women in the East of the EU express different levels of concern.
- **The situation is considered very worrying** by participants in Estonia, Slovenia, Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Poland and the Czech Republic. In all countries, the most widespread fear is of unemployment and more generally the worsening social

situation as a result of the crisis. The negative role of the media is blamed as much as if not more than in the other countries. In some countries (particularly Bulgaria and Slovenia), participants stressed the role that each citizen must play to tackle the crisis.

- In Romania, Lithuania and Latvia however, **the situation is seen as disastrous**. In these three countries which are most hard hit by the crisis, there is a very pervasive impression that the worst is yet to come, particularly with regard to unemployment. In Lithuania and Latvia the crisis is experienced as a real drama with an outcome that is more uncertain than ever. There is also a great moral crisis. In Romania there is a feeling of anxiety that the poorest countries, starting with theirs, will have to foot the bill for the crisis.

Interest in and information about politics

- The amount of interest in politics of women in the East of the EU is very variable: it ranges from rejection, through vague to moderate interest to strong emotions entailing passionate debates.
- They say they lack information about politics in general, including about the EU. Nevertheless overall they show more interest in the EU than do women in the pre-2004 countries.
- In detail:
 - Women in **Slovenia, Slovakia, Latvia, Bulgaria and Hungary** say they were more interested in politics in the past. Now they say they are disillusioned or not very interested.
 - In **Poland, Hungary, Estonia and Romania** they are interested in politics but deplore scandals, the role of the media and corruption.

European elections

- The campaign was considered uninteresting except in Romania and Slovakia.
- Women in the East of the EU do not all have the same view of the usefulness of their vote.
 - In Lithuania and Latvia they do not see any point in voting.
 - In Romania, Poland, Estonia, Slovenia and Bulgaria they think it is useful to vote.
 - In Hungary and Slovakia participants in discussion groups had divided views on the usefulness of voting.
 - In the Czech Republic the European vote is considered secondary in relation to the national elections.
- **Why vote and for whom?**
 - Depending on the country, the decision to vote is made primarily to support a political party or to support a candidate.
- **Reactions to the results:**
 - Slovenia, Poland, Bulgaria: indifferent

- Hungary: concerned at the rise of extremist parties
- Lithuania: dissatisfied
- Estonia and Latvia: satisfied
- Slovakia: feelings of hope and scepticism.

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

The attitudes of the respondents were analysed during group discussions lasting two hours.

The groups were made up on the basis of the following criteria:

- groups of 6 to 11 participants (16 for Belgium, i.e. 2 language groups of 8 people each), according to the traditional method for qualitative surveys;
- aged from 30 to 55;
- having a certain amount of interest in politics without being active or militant;
- equal representation of people who voted and did not vote in the European elections;
- representing average social strata, with a variety of occupations.

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