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## European elections: an opportunity to promote gender equality

**Equal representation of women in institutions goes hand-in-hand with democracy, and political parties must play a key role. This was the conclusion of a debate between European and national MPs held by the Women's Rights Committee ahead of the European elections and on the eve of International Women's Day. However, views differed on how to achieve parity.**

Women represent on average 25% of members of national parliaments and 31% in the European Parliament. Only 11% of top management posts in large companies are held by women. Discrimination is still there, as is violence against women. The pay gap has been widening for some years and is around 17% on average in the EU. These were among figures cited by various speakers and described as "worrying" by Anna Záborská (EPP-ED, SK), chair of the Women's Rights Committee.

### **No democracy without equality**

"In June this year, 375 million voters in the European Union will elect their members of parliament. The turnout figure for women and their balanced representation will be crucial for democracy in the EU and for our society", said European Parliament President Hans-Gert Pöttering at the start of the debate. "The percentage of women in the EP has risen from 16% in 1979 to 31% in 2009 but further progress is needed."

"Women account for 52% of the EU population. They must have equal representation. How can we speak of representative democracy when half the population is under-represented?" asked Commission Vice-President Margot Wallström, who favours a 50/50 target in the European institutions.

"Europe is not in the forefront on women's representation. But we are seeing the emergence of a new discourse that says there is no democracy without equality", said Drude Dahlerup, professor of political science at the University of Stockholm and author of a study on male-female electoral quota systems and their application in Europe.

### **A key role for political parties**

"2009 is a year of renewal for the Parliament and the Commission. Political parties have a key role to play. The candidate selection process is crucial", argued Employment and Social Affairs Commissioner Vladimir Spidla.

In the view of Michael Kocáb, Czech minister for human rights, "women must take part in public life to change politics and contribute fresh perspectives. But how do you motivate the political parties?" he asked, raising the issue of quotas.

### **Are quotas effective?**

# Press release

Drude Dahlerup pointed out that either quotas are enshrined in law (as in five Member States) or they are voluntary. To be effective, quotas must be tailored to the electoral system of the country applying them. For example, the law on parity in France works for list-based systems where women and men can appear alternately on a list but not for national legislative elections, where a single candidate is put forward by each party.

“Quotas have enabled progress to be made on the representation of women”, maintained Maria Incostante of the Italian Senate and she called for “vigilance on the situation of women as they are the ones likely to pay the price for the economic and financial crisis”. According to Liljana Popovska, of the FYROM Assembly, “the use of quotas has enabled us to increase the number of women five-fold”.

However, Justyne Caruana of the Maltese Parliament believed that “positive discrimination works quantitatively but not necessarily qualitatively. We must also get women interested in politics and fight against the glass ceiling”.

Astrid Lulling (EPP-ED, LU), an EP Quaestor, argued that “women must exercise their responsibilities when they are elected” but she was cautious about quotas.

“If you give me something other than quotas that works, I’m prepared to accept it”, said Zita Gurmai (PES, HU), vice-chair of the Women’s Rights Committee and member of the informal inter-institutional network.

“Fines where parity is not respected and rules banning the holding of more than one mandate are two ways of prompting parties to find room for women. But there is another important point: how do we encourage women to take part in politics? The EU has a role to play in the reconciliation of work and family life, and in parental roles”, was the view of Catherine Coutelle of the French National Assembly.

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