

Women in Decision-Making: Overcoming Barriers, Creating Change 20 February 2009

Final Seminar Report

The Cyprus Women's Lobby in cooperation with the European Parliament Office in Cyprus and the European Commission Representation in Cyprus organized the event "Women in Decision-Making: Overcoming Barriers, Creating Change", that took place on 20th February 2009 at the EU House in Nicosia, Cyprus. The event was supported by the National Machinery for Women's Rights, Ministry of Justice and Public Order.

The main aim of the event was to promote the 50/50 Campaign for Parity Democracy of the European Women's Lobby [www.5050democracy.eu] that aims to ensure equality between women and men in decision-making at all levels in the EU institutions and in Cyprus.

The event took place under the auspices of Ms Androulla Vassiliou, Commissioner for Health of the European Commission. Over eighty participants attended the event including Members of Parliament, the Commissioner for Administration (Ombudsperson), representatives of political parties, women's organizations, NGOs, trade unions, as well as the media.

Introductory remarks were made by Susana Pavlou, President of the Cyprus Women's Lobby, Tasos Georgiou, Head of the European Parliament Office in Cyprus, Andreas Hadjoudes, Public Relations and Events Officer, EC Representation in Cyprus and Maro Varnavidou, Secretary General, National Machinery for Women's Rights, Ministry of Justice and Public Order.

In her opening speech, Ms Androulla Vassiliou gave an overview of the situation of women's representation in decision-making in the EU, highlighting that there are only two women Presidents and only one woman Head of Government among EU member states, and only a quarter of all national ministers in the EU are women. Cyprus figures among the lowest in this regard with only one woman in the Council of Ministers. However, she emphasized that there has been a gradual increase in women's representation in EU institutions in recent years such as in the European Parliament where one third MEPs are women. Despite this, Cyprus is one of two countries in the EU that does not have a woman representative in the European Parliament.

Commissioner Vassiliou pointed out that despite women comprising over half the population of the European Union, they are severely under-represented in those institutions where decisions are made that have an impact on women's every day lives. Recent research has demonstrated that there is a strong relationship between the number of women in elected bodies and the establishment of legislation and other policies on issues that directly affect women such as measures for the reconciliation of work and family life, family planning services, and others. Thus, when half of the citizens of the European Union are not properly represented, the economy, the society and Democracy in general suffer.

Commissioner Vassiliou congratulated the European Women's Lobby for its initiative in launching the 50/50 Campaign for Parity Democracy and expressed her steady support for the campaign and its objectives.

The first session focused on *Women in Decision Making: The European Context* with guest speakers Myria Vassiliadou, Secretary General of the European Women's Lobby, and Sonja Lokar of the CEE Network for Gender Equality. During her presentation Sonja Lokar explained the linkage between gender equality and democracy and stated that the lack of women's representation is largely to blame for the fate of women remaining unchanged in many communities. In the case of Cyprus, Sonja Lokar stressed that change can come only through women's leadership and for this reason the issue of representation must be a priority for all.

Myria Vassiliadou, Secretary General of the European Women's Lobby (EWL) presented the objectives of the EWL 50/50 Campaign for Parity Democracy. She pointed out that the under-representation of women in the EU institutions is a serious obstacle to the democratic legitimacy of the EU and undermines all attempts to promote a more inclusive and participatory democracy. For this reason, the EWL is calling for immediate and concrete action to address this. Myria Vassiliadou stressed the importance of political parties and governments as gatekeepers stating that they have the power to ensure the realisation of gender equality ahead of the European Parliament elections in June 2009 by ensuring women are equally represented in their electoral lists and putting gender equality at the heart of their electoral programmes.

Among the key issues raised during the discussion that followed was:

- The direct relationship between women in political life and policy change. This issue was raised by Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou that cited studies that have shown a direct correlation between women's presence in decision-making and issues affecting women being addressed more concretely.
- Women face multiple barriers in attempting to enter political life including lack of funding, lack of institutional support, and unequal treatment by the media. The lack of role models for women was also cited as a barrier to the promotion of women in political life. All participants emphasized the need to find concrete ways to overcome these barriers including measures for the reconciliation of family and professional life, the promotion of gender equality within political party structures, among others.

It was highlighted during the discussion that the absence or marginal presence of women in key decision making bodies hinders the inclusion of a gender perspective in critical spheres of influence. It was also emphasised that the marginalisation of women in political and public life is not solely a question of numbers but also a question of the development of democratic principles and standards.

The second session of the event focused on *Policies and Strategies for the Promotion of Equality between Women and Men in Politics in Cyprus*, where participants had the opportunity to discuss the issue of women in decision making and party electoral programs for the forthcoming EU elections. Representatives from all major political parties in Cyprus participated in the panel including Dina Akkelidou, MP (AKEL) and President of the Parliamentary Committee for Equal Opportunities between Men and Women, Ionas Nicolaou, Vice-President of DYSH, Yiannos Katsourides, Representative of AKEL, Antigone Papadopoulou, MP (DHKO), Roula Mavronikola, MP (EDEK), and Roxanne Koudounari, Representative of the Cyprus Greens Party. The facilitator of the discussion was Alexia Panayiotou, Lecturer at the University of Cyprus. All the party representatives indicated that they are aware of the problem of the

underrepresentation of women in political life and acknowledge the necessity to take action. However, it was unclear what solutions and measures the parties were proposing in order to address these issues.

Roula Mavronikola, MP (EDEK) stood for the use of party quotas, for the code of conduct for public media, and for the development of concrete measures to support women and men in the reconciliation of work and family life. The absence of high quality and low cost child care and the unequal distribution of responsibility within the family were issues raised by all participants as being among the major obstacles to women's representation in politics.

She announced that EDEK will have at least one woman on its candidate list for the MEP elections, but admitted that their focus will be to get at least one candidate from their list elected, and not in promoting women candidates specifically.

Antigone Papadopoulou, MP (DHKO) raised the issue of gender budgeting with regard to public funds given to the political parties for campaigning, emphasizing the lack of regulations obliging parliamentary parties to use a part of their budget for political empowerment of their women members.

Ionas Nicolaou, Vice-President of DHSY highlighted the traditional mentality of gender stereotyping that is pervasive in Cypriot society as a significant obstacle to women's equal representation in political life, and insisted on quotas as a necessary tool for equal representation. Mr. Nicolaou announced that his party will have at least one well-known woman candidate on their party list and intends to target women voters in its electoral programme. All participants agreed that the patriarchal structure of political parties in Cyprus, and the enduring conservative features of Cypriot society result in a lack of confidence and support networks for women wishing to enter political life.

Dina Akkelidou, speaking on behalf of AKEL, stated that AKEL does not believe in quotas as a solution to a very complex problem, and that their priority is to work on creating favorable conditions for women including the balancing of private and professional life.

Roxanne Koudounari, Representative of the Cyprus Green Party, presented their electoral program explaining that it is characterized by a gender sensitive approach for ensuring equal representation of women in decision making. She also explained that although they had a parity clause in their Statutes this regulation was dropped during the last party congress, because they felt that women are already encouraged to participate in the decision making processes of the party. However, following removal of the parity clause, she explained that the percentage of women participating in the political committee of the party, which is the most critical body in terms of decision making, fell from 50% to 30%.

All participants agreed that the issues faced by women who wish to participate in political and public life are broad and multifaceted. Apart from the above, other important issues include gender discrimination in the media that does not give equal coverage to women political candidates and continues to sustain negative gender stereotypes. The media does not give sufficient attention to women's organizations that are often the ones who formulate party gender equality policies and lobby for gender equality mechanisms and action plans within party structures. The idea of the state imposing financial fines to the parties who do not ensure the election of women candidates was rejected by all party representatives.



Concluding remarks:

The significance of the event lies in the fact that it marked the beginning of a much needed dialogue on women's representation in decision making among relevant stakeholders. It is the first time in Cyprus that all relevant stakeholders, including political party representatives, have come together to engage in constructive dialogue on the issue of women's representation in political life. The 80 participants that attended the event included Members of Parliament, representatives from all the main political parties of Cyprus, NGOs, women's organisations, trade unions, as well as the media.

All parliamentary parties understand that, during this EU electoral campaign, they will be under the pressure and scrutiny of the women's civil society movement and that they will have to think about gender aspects of their electoral programmes and campaigns. It was clear that the parties will try to target women voters through their electoral programmes however it remains to be seen if and how they will achieve this. Although the party representatives made clear that at least one woman will be on their candidate list for the upcoming MEP elections, this is a far cry from equal representation and points to the lack of real political will to address the issue of gender [in]equality in party structures and processes. It is evident that more concerted effort and action is urgently needed to address women's underrepresentation in all spheres of political and public life in Cyprus.

The event received extensive media coverage by all major television channels during their news bulletins and by all major newspapers. In addition, all national radio stations mentioned the event in their news bulletins, whilst the event organizers and guests were invited to a number of radio and television programmes to discuss the 50/50 Campaign and the issue of women's representation in political life more generally.