

Wednesday, 15 November 2006 - Strasbourg

Women in international politics (debate)

Ana Maria Gomes (PSE), rapporteur . - (PT) Madam President, ladies and gentlemen, I wish to express my gratitude for all the contributions that I received from all political groups in drawing up this report. These contributions improved the report substantially. The presence of women in international political life has increased. Take, for example, Chancellor Merkel, President Bachelet and President Johnson-Sirleaf and Prime-Ministers Han Myeong-Sook of South Korea and Diogo of Mozambique. Indeed, the EU Presidency is currently headed by a woman, Mrs Halonen. Yet closer inspection reveals that the female presence in politics remains unsatisfactory, both at world and European level, including within each Member State. Gathering data for this report was not easy, and that tells its own bleak story.

At global level, in spite of the declaration and the platform for action adopted in Beijing, and in spite of the Millennium Development Goals, only ten out of the 191 Member States of the United Nations have a woman as Head of State or Government and only 16% of members of parliament around the world are women. In the UN, of the 91 envoys or representatives of the Secretary-General only nine are women.

In spite of Resolution 1325 of the Security Council, adopted six months ago, the composition of international bodies and missions involved in conflict prevention continues to be characterised by inequality. Three weeks ago, the Security Council held a debate on women, peace and security in order to gauge progress in the implementation of Resolution 1325. All agreed that there remains much to be done to translate good intentions and positive words into action. What emerged from the debate were recommendations to involve more women in peace missions and thereby to improve the operational effectiveness of these missions. There was also a call for an urgent change of culture in the office of the Deputy Secretary-General for peace-keeping operations. Our report contains similar recommendations.

I now turn to the situation in Europe. Despite Resolution 2025, and others from this Parliament, and despite, too, the Lisbon Strategy, the composition of the European Commission is not yet characterised by gender parity. Furthermore, out of 107 EU third-country delegations, only seven women are currently serving at the level of Head of EC delegation. In the Council, there is only one woman among the 14 personal representatives of the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy. This despite the abundance of qualified, experienced and capable women in the Member States and in the European Institutions.

At practically all levels of decision-making apart from the top, there are signs that the glass ceiling is starting at least to bulge, if not to break, because it is indeed only at the very top echelons of European power that women remain scandalously under-represented. At national level, I wish to highlight the pioneering example of the Zapatero Government in Spain. In a world in which the political machinery has a history of blocking women's involvement in political and economic power, this is a model example, which demonstrates that democracy characterised by gender parity is possible and depends a great deal on clear political leadership.

Monday, 10 December 2007 - Strasbourg

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT intervention

The conclusions of this report are simple: action must be taken to redress inequality of opportunities at European and national level in all fields: for example, the UN and its Secretary-General, by means of a human resources policy that ought to act as an example to the world, and the EU, by means of support to international women's networks and human resources policies ensuring the balanced presence of men and women in positions of political and economic decision-making.

In this connection, I welcome the fact that the Council has just sent a questionnaire to the Member States to gauge the level of implementation of Resolution 1325. National governments must also encourage more women to apply for political positions at national, European and international level and must ensure that electoral systems produce democratic institutions with balanced representation; no democratic institutions should have fewer than 40% and more than 60% of either sex. Quotas and other mechanisms designed to redress the balance, currently necessary for women, may become necessary for men. Without parity of representation, democracy is incomplete and does not work properly. In this regard, laws and measures contributing towards a better home and working life balance have a vital role to play.

Lastly, political parties should promote women's involvement by setting quotas and establishing other mechanisms for redressing the balance, including specific training for women to embark on a career in politics. The impetus for change also depends on the quality of party political leadership. Take my country, Portugal, for example, where women have only been allowed to become, for example, judges, diplomats and armed and security forces professionals since the fall of the dictatorship in 1974. These are careers that could provide many more candidates of both sexes for all kinds of European and international missions and posts. Since 1974, there has been extraordinary progress in the presence of women in these careers, yet this progress does not extend to the top of these fields, for example in government or party political decision-making. It is abundantly clear that the glass ceiling effect is in operation, in spite of the overwhelming presence of qualified women in universities, public administration and the world of work as a whole. A parity law governing the electoral lists of the political parties has recently been adopted and practical results are expected. On the path we must follow, numbers should not be our prime concern. Rather, we must recognise and highlight the qualitative difference made by the political representation of women in defining government agendas, in conflict resolution, in transparency and in presentation of accounts; in other words, in reinforcing the rule of law and democracy.