

GENDER EQUALITY COMMISSION
(GEC)
9TH meeting
28 April 2016
AGORA meeting room G01
Strasbourg

Notes for Ms Centemero, Chair of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination of the
Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Dear Chairperson,
Members of the Gender Equality Commission,
Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, thank you very much for inviting me to take part in your 9th meeting.

I believe in regular exchanges between the various parts of our Organisation sharing common goals, and I appreciate this opportunity to share information with you on the work of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination of the Parliamentary Assembly, with a particular focus on recent developments, and to learn more about your activities.

Last week, the Parliamentary Assembly debated the report that I prepared for the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination on “Assessing the impact of measures to improve women’s political representation”. The Assembly adopted the resolution stemming from this report by an overwhelming majority. I was very pleased with the results of the voting. It showed that the present generation of European legislators is aware, more aware than we might have expected, of the need to promote women’s political representation. They are ready to support positive measures that used to be far from consensual, including quotas. Furthermore, this awareness and support are shared by parliamentarians across the political spectrum, from left to right.

The Council of Europe has played a part in making positive measures more known and more popular. As far back as 2003, a recommendation of the Committee of Ministers¹ on *balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision making* asked member States to “promote and encourage special measures to stimulate and support women’s will to participate in political and public decision making”. This recommendation set a clear threshold, by defining *balanced participation of women and men* as the situation when the representation of either women or men in any decision-making body in political or public life is of at least 40%.

¹ Rec(2003)3

The Parliamentary Assembly constantly kept this text into account when dealing with matter of gender equality in decision-making bodies. The Committee that I have the honour to chair was obviously at the forefront of this combat.

Through a number of adopted texts, originally prepared by our Committee, the Assembly consistently supported the idea that electoral quotas reserved for women were necessary. However, they were presented as an exception to the principle of equality and, as such, they were considered as justified for a limited time. In other words, they were recommended as temporary, urgent remedy to the situation of endemic underrepresentation of women. Once a gender balance would be reached, quotas should be set aside. As you will see, I tried to push the limit a bit further in the text that I prepared for the debate. And the Assembly responded positively. I will get back to this in a minute.

First, allow me to say a few words about the preparation work that I carried out in the last year, and the conclusions that I reached.

There was desk research, which included collecting information on legislation and policies to promote women's political participation by means of a questionnaire sent out to national parliaments by the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation.

There were several hearings, and I would like to refer in particular to one with Ms Maria del Carmen ALANIS FIGUEROA, substitute member of the Venice Commission in respect of Mexico.

There was also quite some field work, which included election observation activities in Turkey, participating in relevant seminars in Georgia and Ukraine, where I had the great pleasure to meet your Chairperson Sergiy Kyslytsya, with whom I had a fruitful exchange on women's political representation in Ukraine. I was also authorised by the Committee to conduct a fact-finding visit to Sweden, which was a real turning point in the preparation of the report.

These activities in part confirmed my views, in part gave me new insight. The notion of *measures aimed at improving women's political representation*, I realised, needs to be interpreted in a very broad way.

In fact, progress in the field of women's political representation has been achieved, among other things, by means of reforms of constitutional legislation recognising voting rights (both the right to vote and to be elected), the right of access to public office and other fundamental rights and freedoms. Even the rights to property, equal inheritance, marriage, citizenship, are necessary preconditions for having an active role in the society, and then in public and political life. As the resolution adopted last week says, "Provisions on political and civil rights for women in the various constitutions are *essential*, because they *pave the way for gender equality and for equal citizenship* and are the foundation for more specific action for equality."

Women's political representation is not only a question of electoral legislation, but rather the result of a wide variety of factors:

- social factors, including the welfare system, parental leave schemes, which affect the way care and household duties are shared between women and men; but also other measures helping reconciling work and family life;

- economic factors, such as the persistent pay gap, and more generally the gender gap in access to professions and careers; access to financing of small businesses is also often more difficult for women than it is for men;

- cultural factors are also crucial: they determine the actual possibility for women to participate both in political life and in the economic and social development of a country. Education and training are necessary in order to acquire the skills that are relevant to political activity. Gender stereotypes are also a cultural factor, affecting the possibility for women to acquire real parity. Once again, education may help eradicating these stereotypes. Mass media also have an important responsibility in this field.

In the light of the preparation work of my report I am more convinced than ever that we should not intervene on these factors separately, as they are closely intertwined. The countries which were most successful in achieving gender equality in political life are those that adopt a global approach and design legislation and policies based on a gender perspective in all areas.

Nevertheless, electoral systems may have an impact on the actual representation of women. If correctly designed and implemented, they are in fact the main way to achieve significant progress in a short time. In other words, if women's political representation has not increased over time as a result of the evolution of society and people's mindsets, or other factors, quotas may help us make the leap. Not all quotas are the same. In order to be effective, quotas need to be ambitious. We cannot expect electoral legislation to revolutionise a political system and lead to gender balanced representation, if they only introduce a minimum quota of 20 percent for the underrepresented gender. The bar must be set high, and the goal should be at least that 40% that we referred to.

In addition, quota systems need to be coupled with sanctions. Not simply financial sanctions, as the experience shows that political parties often prefer to pay the fines rather than abide by the quota rules. More substantial sanctions, and particularly the rejection of the list in case of non-compliance, are more effective. Accompanying measures, including training and awareness-raising activities, as well as measures to reconcile private life and political activities, are also crucial: they help make the effects of quotas sustainable in the longer term.

Quotas have often been viewed as a temporary measure, which should put aside once the goal has been achieved. I believe that this is risky. There are cases of political systems which have abolished quotas only to see women's political representation go down drastically again. There are even countries which almost reached gender equality in political representation without enforcing quotas, but then went back to lower levels of women's representation, because the political landscape at large had changed.

I believe that we should take one step further and switch to gender parity. Parity, as a principle enshrined in legislation at the highest level, which is ideally the constitution, or at least the electoral legislation, means that all political bodies should be composed, in principle, by an equal share of women and men. Only this guarantees that these bodies represent the population.

As Europeans, we often believe that we lead the way in matters of democracy and human rights. In this case, in fact, the good example was set by non-European countries, particularly in Latin America. Several of them have enshrined the principle of parity in their constitution. I believe that we should follow that example. This recommendation is contained, worded in a cautious way, in the resolution adopted last week. The Assembly "supports" this principle, the text reads, and States should "consider" introducing it in their systems.

I am grateful to the Assembly for taking onboard this idea, which may look to ambitious, but I consider it crucial. We need to aim high, if we want to achieve enough.

I will be happy to discuss with you and reply to your questions.

Thank you.