

Panel 1 – Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy 2014-2017: Taking stock
Elena Centemero,

I am very happy to be with you today in Tallinn, and to take part in this conference to present the views and contribution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in achieving balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making.

I am pleased to say, as Chairperson of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, that the Parliamentary Assembly has been very active in promoting gender equality, in the member States of the Council of Europe but also within its own structures.

The most recent text of the Assembly is Resolution 2111 which was adopted last April on the basis of a report that I prepared on "Assessing the impact of measures to improve women's political representation". The Assembly adopted this resolution by an overwhelming majority and I was very pleased with the result of the voting. It showed that the present generation of legislators is aware of the need to promote gender equality in politics. 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.

Role of the Council of Europe in promoting positive measures

The Council of Europe has played an important part in making positive measures more known and more widespread, through its Gender Equality Strategy and legal texts which contributed to advance women's rights to equality.

In the field of political participation, the Committee of Ministers adopted a recommendation on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making, back in 2003. This recommendation set a clear threshold and provided that there is a balanced participation of women and men when the representation of either women or men in any decision-making body in political or public life is of 40% at least.

The Parliamentary Assembly consistently supported the idea that electoral quotas reserved for women were necessary. However, it viewed quotas as an exception to the principle of equality, justified only for a limited period of time. Therefore, quotas were recommended as a temporary remedy to the situation of endemic underrepresentation of women.

In the report that I prepared, I tried to push the limit a bit further than that. But, 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.

*The report -
factors determining the level of representation*

the preparation of my report on women's political representation implied desk research, several hearings and a considerable amount of field work, which included election observation activities in Turkey, participating in relevant seminars in Georgia and Ukraine, and, last but not least, a fact-finding visit to Sweden. This visit was a turning point in the preparation of the report.

My two main conclusions were the following:

First, progress in the field of women's political representation has been achieved through a variety of measures:

- reforms of constitutional legislation – first of all to grant women voting rights (both the right to vote and to be elected);
- reforms of private law: equal right to property, equal inheritance, marriage, citizenship, are necessary preconditions for having an active role in society, and then in public and political life.

Second, women's political representation is also the result of a wide variety of factors:

- social factors, which affect the way care and household duties are shared between women and men;
- 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. Gender stereotypes in particular affect the possibility for women to acquire real parity. Education and mass media have in my view an important responsibility to eradicate these stereotypes.

I am more convinced than ever that these factors are closely intertwined. The countries which were most successful in achieving gender equality in political life, such as Sweden, are those that adopt a holistic approach and design legislation and policies based on a gender perspective in all areas.

Electoral systems and gender quotas

Nevertheless, we all know that 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 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% for the underrepresented gender. The bar must be set high, and the goal should be at least the 40% that we referred to.

In addition, quota systems need to be coupled with sanctions. Not simply financial sanctions, as 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 be 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.

Next step: parity

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, ideally the constitution, or at least in the electoral legislation, means that all political bodies should be composed, in so far as possible, by an equal share of women and men. Only this guarantees that these bodies represent the population.

In this respect, the example was set by non-European countries, particularly in Latin America. They have enshrined the principle of parity in their constitutions, which means that all political bodies should in principle be composed by women and men equally.

I believe that we should follow their example. This recommendation is reflected also in Resolution 2111 (2016) of the Parliamentary Assembly, adopted in April and stemming from the report I prepared.

The Assembly "supports" parity, the text reads, and States should "consider" introducing it in their systems. This wording is cautious, because we all know that such an important change cannot be introduced in a legal system overnight. It requires political will, a large debate, and support from the public opinion. This idea is ambitious, but still realistic. I cannot see why our countries would not be able to adopt it.

Participation of women in the Parliamentary Assembly

To conclude, I would like to say that in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, each national delegation has the obligation to include, at a very minimum, one member of the under-represented sex appointed as a representative¹. Failing to comply with this requirement, the credentials of the national delegation will not be ratified by the Assembly. I should specify that, on several occasions, the participation of delegations has been suspended because they did not comprise a woman representative among them (Ireland, Malta, for example).

As a result of this measure, women represent 35% of the total number of MPs in the Parliamentary Assembly. In addition, in 2014, for the second time in Assembly's history, a woman was elected President. This ratio of women and men in the Parliamentary Assembly can of course be improved but it is quite encouraging if compared to the situation in the 15 European countries where women's representation in parliament ranges from 10 to 20% only².

We certainly all agree that there is a long way to go to achieve gender-balanced representation in political and public life and we can sometimes feel discouraged by the slow progress or even decrease of women's representation in politics in certain countries. But gender equality is about democracy. And democracy should be for all, otherwise it is not democracy. That is why we should not spare our efforts to promote gender equality in political representation, like in any other field.

Thank you for your attention.

¹ Rule 6.2 of the Rules of Procedure of the Assembly.

² For example, Hungary (10.1%), Malta (12.9%), Russian Federation (13.6%).