

CONFERENCE ON “GENDER DIMENSIONS OF CORRUPTION”

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“The gender dimensions of corruption: a parliamentary view”

Excellencies,
Dear members of Parliament,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Distinguished participants,

I am honoured to be with you today to open this conference about such an innovative subject-matter and to share with you my experience as a parliamentarian committed to gender equality.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has addressed several aspects which underlie the issue of the gender dimensions of corruption: the fight against corruption, gender equality and women’s access to decision-making bodies. I will come back to these issues later.

Are women less corrupt than men? Many studies have tried to reply to this question. But research on the gender dimensions of corruption does not offer a justification for this statement. Figures show that in countries where the level of women representation is high, there is less corruption. But it can also be argued that women would be as corrupt as men if workplaces and decision-making bodies comprised more women.

Personally, I think that women are less tolerant of corruption.

The reason for this is that women are more affected by corruption than men. Of course, men are also victims of corruption. **But the impact of corruption on women is tougher.**

Corruption deprives women from access to decision-making bodies which are led by male networks. When elections are carried out through vote-buying, when political parties can be bought and sold, when promotion in the economic sphere is achieved through personal connections, women have fewer opportunities to increase their participation in the public and private sectors.

Corruption also reduces public resources and consequently the family allowances and social services from which many women benefit as primary caretakers. The chaotic operation of

public services is also a source of corruption experienced by poor women. Corruption will be the only means for women to access public services, for example by paying bribes for enrolling their children in schools or for receiving medical treatment.

Corruption may also lead to sexual abuse of women. Let's face facts. We all know that when a man is asked to pay a bribe, a woman, in particular when she is in a vulnerable economic situation, may be subject to sexual harassment or abuse. This is a serious violation of human dignity and we should consider including sexual extortion in the definition of corruption.

Corruption of the law-enforcement system prevents women from reporting and lodging complaints against the acts of corruption and abuse of powers of which they are victims, in particular when they are committed by police officers. It also deprives them of effective remedies when their rights are violated, when they are victims of violence and abuse.

My belief is that when women finally gain access to workplaces and decision-making structures, they are less inclined to perpetrate a practice which affected them in the first place.

Even if no causal link has been proved between gender and corruption, we can agree that women are affected harshly by corruption.

What can we do to change this situation?

I'm convinced that a higher participation of women in decision-making structures may have a significant impact on the level of corruption in our member States.

In this respect, **I think that the recommendation made by *Transparency International* to combine empowerment of women in governance with targeted anti-corruption policies is an excellent one.**

This recommendation usefully reminds us of the link which exists between gender equality, democracy and the fight against corruption. It underlines that the promotion of gender equality and women empowerment is essential for building an effective democracy, which is of foremost importance for fighting against corruption.

The Parliamentary Assembly has worked a lot in the fields of the fight against corruption and gender equality, which relate to the core values of the Council of Europe of human rights, rule of law and democracy.

Fight against corruption

In the field of the fight against corruption, I would like to mention in particular the resolution adopted in 2000 on the "Role of parliaments in fighting corruption" (Resolution 1214). It underlined the crucial responsibility of the Council of Europe, its Parliamentary Assembly and of the national parliaments in promoting good governance and raising awareness of the dangers of corruption.

This resolution also stressed, in quite a dramatic tone, that (I quote) *“if parliaments, as the last bastions against corruption, are themselves affected by it, the battle may well be lost”*.

I won't be naïve and say that parliaments are not affected by corruption. We have all heard about political scandals and it is sadly obvious that corruption is a problem for any decision-making body, including parliaments.

The drafters of the 1999 Council of Europe Criminal Law Convention on Corruption acknowledged this reality by inserting in this Convention provisions on the bribery of members of domestic public assemblies (Article 4), of members of foreign public assemblies (Article 6) and even of members of international parliamentary assemblies (Article 10). However, some of our member States have made reservations to one or the other of these articles (for instance, Italy and Monaco).

Members of parliaments have the possibility to act at several levels: they can improve legislation concerning election campaign financing and the funding of political parties; they can formulate guidelines regarding conflicts of interest; and they can establish codes of conduct for elected representatives and public officials.

In addition, as underlined by the Assembly in a recent report on “Corruption as a threat to the rule of law” (doc. 13228 of June 2013), I'm firmly convinced that corruption jeopardises the good functioning of public institutions. It disrupts the legislative process by using the lack or the absence of regulation of lobbying activities, of code of conduct for legislators and of clear rules to prevent conflicts of interest. As a result, corruption leads to the adoption of standards which meet the particular interests of the corrupters, instead of meeting the general interest.

Being a member of parliament myself, I would like to insist on the statement contained in Resolution 1214 of the Parliamentary Assembly that *“parliamentarians have a duty (...) to set as example of incorruptibility to society as a whole by implementing and enforcing their own codes of conduct.”*

This leads me to mention the measures taken by the Parliamentary Assembly in order to prevent conflicts of interests among its members.

Prevention of conflicts of interests

The Rules of Procedure of the Assembly clearly stipulate that in the exercise of their duties, the members of the Assembly shall undertake to comply with the principles and rules set out in the code of conduct for members of the Assembly (Rule 12).

This code provides, in particular, that members should avoid conflicts between any actual or potential economic, commercial, financial or other interests on a professional, personal or family level, and the public interest in the work of the Assembly. In case of conflict, the member of the Assembly must resolve it in favour of public interest. If he or she is unable to avoid such a conflict of interests, it shall be disclosed.

An internal procedure is in place in order to ensure compliance with the code of conduct and it is worth noting that the main sanction in case of breach of this code is the disclosure of the inappropriate conduct.

Rapporteurs of the Parliamentary Assembly are bound by another code of conduct which sets out the principles and rules applying to them in the discharge of their duties as rapporteurs. This code of conduct for rapporteurs particularly insists on the key principles of neutrality, impartiality and objectivity. A breach of this code may result in the rapporteur being replaced by another one.

The credibility of the work of the Assembly and the confidence placed by the citizens in their parliamentarians depend a lot on the existence of these codes of conduct but, most importantly, on their actual full implementation. I also think that, when self-regulation has failed, justice must do its work, in particular in case of (alleged) corruption.

The Parliamentary Assembly has done a lot in the field of the fight against corruption. But you may have noted that I did not mention any link with gender issues. The reason is simple: the Assembly has not worked so far on the gender dimensions of corruption.

The absence of work in this area may in itself be very telling. Should we conclude that the parliamentarians working on corruption are not gender-sensitive? Is it due to the level of participation of women in the Parliamentary Assembly?

Participation of women in the Parliamentary Assembly

To be fair, I should say that the Parliamentary Assembly has taken a key measure in order to increase the participation of women as members. In accordance with the Rules of Procedure of the Assembly, each national delegation to the Assembly should include (I quote) *“members of the under-represented sex at least in the same percentage as in their parliaments and, at a very minimum, one member of the under-represented sex appointed as a representative”* (Rule 6.2).

Failing to comply with this requirement, the credentials of the national delegation will not be ratified by the Parliamentary 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 parliamentarians in the Assembly represent one-third of the total number of MPs.

This ratio of women and men in the Parliamentary Assembly can of course be improved. But it is quite good and encouraging if compared to the situation in certain parliaments of our member States, where only approximately 23% of members of national parliaments are women.

This average figure of 23% hides in reality a huge gap between a handful of countries in which women's representation in parliament exceeds 40% (Andorra, Finland, Sweden) and

many more countries in which it is under 20% (Albania, Georgia, Estonia, Monaco), or even under 10% (Hungary, Ukraine).

Various measures have been recommended by the Parliamentary Assembly in its Resolution 1898 of October 2012 on “Political parties and women’s political representation”, in particular the introduction of a minimum quota of the under-represented sex.

Despite all these recommendations and incentives, we have to admit that the road ahead is still long. But we must continue tirelessly our efforts, including within the Parliamentary Assembly.

Excellencies

Ladies and gentlemen,

What can we do to give a follow-up to the recommendation of *Transparency International* to combine empowerment of women in governance with targeted anti-corruption policies?

As members of parliament, we can adopt legislation on combating corruption and code of conduct for parliamentarians.

We can also improve the level of participation of women in our legislative bodies, by encouraging them to stand for elections, by creating favourable conditions for their candidacies, such as quotas or measures enabling them to reconcile political engagement and family commitments.

We can also encourage women parliamentarians to participate in committees dealing with matters which are not directly linked to what is often seen as “women’s issues”.

I am convinced that a higher participation of women in our institutions will strengthen our democracies and will therefore help us to fight against the scourge of corruption.

To conclude, I would like to say that the gender dimensions of corruption are in my view a very innovative topic for the Council of Europe. And I want to assure you that the Committee on equality and non-discrimination of the Parliamentary Assembly would be pleased to contribute to this work and to participate in the meetings of GRECO dedicated to this issue if you decide to continue working on it.

I thank you for your attention.