

Conference on Women in local politics

Tunis, 26 September 2017

Speech by Gudrun Mosler-Törnström, President of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe

Dear Minister,
Dear participants of the conference,

I am very pleased to be here today and to speak to you, as President of the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. I would like to thank our Tunisian partners, the Ministry for Family and Women and the Ministry of the Environment and Local Affairs, for taking the initiative of organising this Conference on the topic of gender equality. This topic lies at the heart of the issue of fundamental human rights.

Who is the Congress within the Council of Europe? When I say we I mean the Congress

We are a political assembly that brings together local and regional elected representatives from the 47 member States of the Council of Europe, representing 200.000 local and regional authorities. We are a platform where mayors, councilors and representatives of the local and regional level can share ideas, exchange best practices and work together with the conviction that local and regional democracy is the foundation of any democratic state, for the benefit of our citizens.

And I hope that in the future you can join this assembly in the frame of our status of partner for local democracy.

With the Jasmine Revolution of 2011, Tunisia has opened a new era. Tremendous changes have occurred since 2011, from the adoption of a new constitution in 2014 and holding of legislative elections to the territorial reform and the recent process of decentralisation of power – a process that brought us here today.

The recent postponement of elections is an unfortunate delay in the democratic process, and we strongly hope that local elections will be held in the beginning of next year, in order to bring democracy to local communities. These steps are crucial to the development of local and regional self-government in this country.

We are convinced that our cooperation with Tunisia is of mutual benefit to communities and citizens on both shores of the Mediterranean, where local and regional authorities share the same concerns and can learn from each other's experience. We are here today to speak about gender equality.

Why is the Promotion of gender equality as a new impetus for democracy of such an importance?

Engaging all members in the society and ensuring the participation of women is a fundamental requirement because a society cannot be free and democratic if the liberty and dignity of half of its members are not guaranteed and upheld. When I speak of equality I am speaking about equality in the law BUT also equality in practice in reality.

Today I am here to represent the Congress, but If you allow me I want to share my experience as a women politician and give you some personal background.

Since 20 years I am in politics on different level - local, regional, European. I am married, mother of 3 children (now grown up), 2 grand children. During those 20 years a change in attitudes towards

women in politics has taken place in my country Austria, as well as in other European states. But, there is still a long way to go. In many countries, women are still underrepresented in parliament and government.

Where are the obstacles?

For centuries, politics was men's business, working conditions in politics are adapted to the world of men, for women and their interests a significant disadvantage. To break up fossilised structures and to change them take time and patience.

To break up this culture of none parity, we in the Congress are through positive experiences in our member states convinced, that the grassroots level offers better chances for changes and the participation of women as members of municipal or regional councils, mayors or presidents of regions. This is also a level where women can become directly involved in a day-to-day administration of communities.

We may not forget that the local level is the level political talents can develop and grow. Too few women are detrimental to the political landscape in each country.

That causes a great deal of lost potential for the society. Often women govern with a different experience than men. Women contribute a different outlook on public affairs, addressing them in a more pragmatic, not in an overly politicised way of "politicians". Women become more easily than men active of a cause, and are much less inclined to play "political games".

What should, what can be done?

Gender equality is on high of the Council of Europe's agenda, as a fundamental requirement of democracy and governance: an open society cannot work if half of the citizens is not represented and involved at all levels.

When we talk about fair representation and participation of women, setting minimum quotas can be part of the solution, as an intermediate stage. However, the enforceable quota in itself is not enough. We need to ensure qualitative and meaningful contribution of women that goes beyond figures. Political parties in particular must give priority to supporting women candidates that represent the concerns and experiences of their communities. The Congress also encourages the setting up of women's networks, which is of crucial importance for multiplying political efforts of women.

I am pleased to say that we in the Congress practice what we preach and set the example. The Congress itself has set the requirement that women must represent at least 30% in each of its 47 national delegations – a requirement with which all countries must comply since 2008. This has turned into a success story for women's representation in national delegations and in leading positions. I am the first women president in the over 60 years history of the Congress. In the current mandate 2016-2020 women constitute 65 % of the executive of the Congress. Filling seats in the delegation is one thing; giving women real power as chairs of committees and Presidents of Congress Chambers is another objective and I can personally attest that we are achieving it!

We have adopted several texts promoting gender equality. The recent one, adopted last October: „Women's participation in public life at local and regional levels: good practices in member states and Congress action“. You can download the report from the Congress website and there is a paper version in your file.

Another issue that will be addressed during this Conference is the negative attitude that women sometimes have to face, be it from the media or from their male colleagues, which leads to a lack of interest of women in politics. Not only do we have to change rules and legislations: I believe it mainly has to do with changing culture and mentalities.

Indeed, the only reason for the persistent unequal treatment is our historical culture, stereotypes and prejudice built over centuries of inequality – prejudice that has become part of our culture and our thinking. Only strong commitment of all forces of society and positive examples set at all levels of governance can change this fact.

Tunisia is not alone in facing the issues of women's low participation and discrimination against them. The situation in Europe for women is unfortunately not satisfactory either, even differences exist between countries. The fair integration and representation of women in the society is a lengthy and challenging process, which will need strong commitment.

But equality between women and men is not only a basic human right and a fundamental requirement of democracy – it also makes sense economically, socially and politically. Releasing women's economic and creative potential can in fact double the society's output.

This is why we need to ensure the concrete implementation of all good standards and legislations and this is where local and regional authorities need to play their part, to set the example at their level and denounce any discrimination to promote equality.

The historic changes in Tunisia offer great opportunities for democratic transformations, for building fair and prosperous societies based on shared human values and the democratic principles of pluralism and equality. These opportunities must not be missed in particular for women, and we, European politicians, must act as good neighbours and share our positive experiences in making these principles work.

Dear Ministers, dear participants,

I am convinced that our exchanges today and tomorrow will bring a significant contribution to the topic to help ensuring participation of women, in particular in the perspective of decentralisation in this country.

And I am convinced

Women change the way politics are done – and we need this change.

Thank you for your attention.