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Women's participation in political life at regional level

Strasbourg, 19 October 2017

How to increase women's participation in political life at regional level?

Despite numerous measures designed to encourage the participation of women in local and regional political life, they are still under-represented in many countries, a fact deplored by the Congress which, for its part, has introduced strict rules on gender balance in its structures. A debate on Thursday 19 October in the Chamber of Regions explored ways of improving the representation of women in member States' local and regional assemblies.

“A society is only truly democratic if its entire population is properly represented in its political life”: opening the debate with this statement, the President of the Chamber of Regions, Gunn Marit Helgesen (Norway, EPP/CCE) expressed concerns about the “crisis of women's participation” in local and regional authorities and pointed out that “the whole of society would benefit from more women participating in political and also economic life”.

In Europe, political representation of women is far from being equal

Chairperson of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and Italian MP, Elena Centemero presented an overview of the situation in member States, noting that women constituted 44% of the Chamber of Regions, compared with only 35% in the Parliamentary Assembly. In only two European countries was the proportion of women in parliament at least 40%, while the average for Europe was a good deal lower, at 25%. According to Ms Centemero, fines imposed on political parties not respecting the principle of parity in candidate lists were ineffective, unlike the rejection of the lists in question by electoral commissions. Italy now applied this measure for regional elections, but alone it would not be enough to change the situation in the long-term. In her eyes, political life needed to be adapted to parity, including the organisation of parliamentary work to be more compatible with private and family lives. In addition, it was important to promote the work of women in politics, particularly as elected women could act as role models for other women wanting to become involved in politics.

Belgian women MPs encourage Tunisian women to participate in local elections

Simone Susskind, member of the Bruxelles-Capitale Regional parliament and president of the “Actions in the Mediterranean” association, then presented an original initiative by

the female members of the Brussels parliament, encouraging women to become involved in local political life in Tunisia. In its new legislation, the country had introduced measures in favour of vertical and horizontal parity on electoral lists.

The parliamentarians had been assisting with the training of 60 female candidates for local elections by helping them to campaign and assert themselves as leaders. After the elections, the female Belgian MPs would assist their Tunisian counterparts to begin their mandates successfully and would invite them to Brussels for a week to gain a first-hand insight into how they organised their work. This model of co-operation had also been trialled in Morocco and could, according to Ms Susskind, be used in the rest of North Africa and all the remaining African countries.

Several members of the Chamber of Regions then presented their own experiences of women's participation in local political life in their countries. Funda Gezmis (Turkey, SOC) pointed out, for example, that Ankara had adopted a "Charter for equality" for women and its political structure had imposed a quota of 33% for female candidates in elections. Christina McKelvie (United Kingdom, NR) stated that Scotland would like to achieve 50:50 equality in all public institutions. However, Irène Dourou (Greece, SOC) added that "the quality of democracy is not only a case of gender distribution" and suggested that, in addition to participation, there needed to be real discussion on gender perspectives in politics. Although many female members of the Chamber spoke, only two men, both young representatives, joined the discussion, rightly calling for greater participation of women in political life. Finally, by way of a concrete illustration of the idea that women could also bring another style to politics, Lejsla Resic (Bosnia and Herzegovina, EPP/CCE) pointed out that, to her knowledge, in the Balkans no women in elected office were implicated in a corruption case.