

Gender and the Politics of Europe: A Neglected Problem?

Written by Rhisiart Tal-e-bot

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The European Committee of Ministers adopted a Recommendation in November 2007 on gender equality standards and mechanisms. The Recommendation was very comprehensive and took into account how to eliminate all forms of gender discrimination against women and also what criteria needs to be met in order to achieve this goal.

The Recommendation focused on both general and specific standards and asked that several points be considered when undertaking lobbying and advocacy work at a state and/or national level in campaigning for gender equality. It is my intention in this brief article to raise several issues regarding the lack of female elected representatives in the political institutions of Europe, with a particular emphasis on the UK.

In the Spanish edition of the newspaper International Herald Tribune on January 12th – 13th there was an article with the headline ‘American Women are never front runners’ by Gloria Steinem. The article discussed gender issues in the US election race between Hilary Clinton and Barak Obama and Steinem argued that: “Obama is seen as unifying by his race while Clinton is seen as divisive by her sex.”

According to a survey by Eurobarometer, published in January 2007, titled Discrimination in the European Union, it was recorded that the EU public perceive discrimination based on ethnic origins to be more widespread than that based on gender (64% as opposed to 40%). There may be a difference of perception between people’s views of discrimination in the US compared to Europe, but in European politics women are still significantly under represented.

Take the genders of political state leaders in the EU for example. How many female European heads of state, past or present, can you name? The ones that spring to mind of course are Margaret Thatcher (UK), Mary Patricia McAleese (Republic of Ireland) and Angela Merkel (Germany), but aside from these three exceptions there are very few others to speak of. With female leaders of political parties the list is even more restricted.

When female leaders do emerge it is almost within a Shakespearean role of a woman dressed up to play a man’s role. How many times was Margaret Thatcher portrayed as a woman in a man’s trousers or the ‘Iron lady’? Even when women become successful politicians, it seems they are not permitted to retain any of their femininity.

It seems that the word ‘American’ in the Tribune headline article could easily be replaced with Maltese, Polish, Italian, Spanish, Czech or the vast majority of other European states. Women front runners in any election race in the world are the exception to the rule and not the norm. The French Presidential elections in 2007, where Royal ran against Sarkozy, brought both issues of gender and ethnic origin to the fore for the first time, at such a public level, in the history of the French democratic process. However, of the two issues it was undoubtedly Royal’s gender and the possibility of a first female French President that was the most talked about point.

In the EU, 72% of people think that there should be more female members of parliament, but female representation in European state and national Parliaments make for a depressing read. Top of the EU league table, as of March 2007 for percentage of women representatives in their state Parliaments is Sweden with 47.3%, followed closely by

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Finland(42%) and Denmark(36.9). At the bottom of the table is Malta with 9.2%,Romania with (11.2%) and Bulgaria(22.1%). The UK is ranked 14th in the EU (out of 27 member states) with women making up 19.6% of members in the state parliament in Westminster.

In the UK's devolved administrations of Northern Ireland,Scotland,Wales and London elected female representation in the respective institutions, as of May 2007, is significantly better than in Westminster, with the Welsh National Assembly topping the list with 46.7%, followed by the London Assembly with 36% and Scotland with 33.3%. The Northern Ireland Assembly though comes in last with a disappointing 16.7% female representation. Nevertheless it is fair to assume that the devolved administrations are generally more representative of our societies than the UK central Government is.

The importance of elected female representatives in our societies can be seen when taking the examples of Wales and Scotland. Women have played more of a role in shaping the policies and agendas within these countries in childcare, equal pay and the social economy than anywhere else in the UK. Also, research published by the Electoral Commission in the UK suggests that a greater gender balance in our political institutions increases voter participation in the electoral process. With widespread lack of interest among the general public towards politics and the political process in much of Europe, especially in western regions, this is one conclusion that cannot afford to be ignored.

As the European Committee of Ministers state in their Recommendation, gender equality needs to be promoted at a state and national level in civil society, political bodies and organisations. If more women are to be elected it is the responsibility of the political party itself to increase its number of female candidates, but how can this be done?

Between 1993 and 1996 the Labour Party in the UK introduced women only shortlists, but had to later drop this policy after a case was successfully brought in under the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. This resulted in a decrease of the number of women elected in the 2001 General Election to the Westminster Government for the first time in 20 years.

It is still nevertheless possible to legally use positive measures to achieve a higher proportion of women candidates and this was part of the reason why the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 was introduced. Measures such as training and mentoring, techniques such as 'twinning' and 'zipping', and quotas (i.e. all-women short-lists) can now all be used. But it remains to be seen how many political parties in the UK are taking advantage of this.

In her article, Steinem argues that the US is still a "race-conscious country", but "gender is probably the most restricting force in American life". There is no doubt that throughout our national and state parliaments in Europe there are on average statistically more elected female representatives than representatives from ethnic minorities (although probably not in terms of national minorities e.g. Breton and Corsicans in France or Galician's and Catalans in Spain). Discrimination based on ethnic origin may be perceived as more widespread than that based on gender, but the fact of the matter is that women make up half the population of the EU and this figure is not reflected at all in their equal representation in the democratic political process or our political institutions.

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