Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Recommendation 1413 (1999)[1]
Final version

Equal representation in political life

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Assembly affirms that the realisation of equal opportunities for women and men is a necessary condition for the functioning of a democratic society.

2. Examination of the present political landscape in the different Council of Europe member states reveals that women are very much under-represented in the political institutions: parliaments, governments, local and regional authorities. Such under-representation is all the more serious given that women pay particular attention to the specific needs of the community.

3. Many factors work against the better representation of women in public life. Cultural practices that perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices, biased political and civic education, and the traditional responsibilities of the private sphere constitute so many obstacles to the entry of more women into political life.

4. In certain member states it has turned out that a level of 30% of women in political bodies constitutes a "critical mass". Beyond this threshold clear qualitative progress can be seen and women can free themselves of the male model of exercising power, to bring their own vision.

5. However, there is nothing inherent in the "first past the post" system of elections to parliaments that prevents women from gaining 30% or more of the constituency seats, and the use of a list system must not be allowed to be an excuse for failure to elect women to "first past the post" seats. To avoid this, targets should be set and it is necessary to examine how women have succeeded in being elected in systems that were either wholly or largely "first past the post".

6. The Council of Europe has been working for some years for greater equality of women and men in political life.

7. The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which was adopted on 18 December 1979 and entered into force on 3 September 1981, provides for the elimination of discrimination based on sex through ensuring for women the right to vote and the right of eligibility and the right to participate in the formulation and implementation of government policy.

8. The Parliamentary Assembly, in Recommendation 1008 (1985) on women in politics, recommended that the Committee of Ministers invite the governments of the member states to promote equality for women through a national institution endowed with the necessary powers and resources to facilitate women's participation in political life on an equal footing with men.

9. The Platform for Action of the Beijing United Nations Conference (4-15 September 1995) recommended governments to take all necessary measures to ensure equality of access for women and full participation in power structures and decision making.

10. The European Ministerial Conference on Equality between Women and Men as a Fundamental Criterion of Democracy (Istanbul, 13 and 14 November 1997) recalled that it is incumbent upon governments and political parties to take action to promote the role of women in politics.

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1. Assembly debate on 22 June 1999 (19th Sitting) (see Doc. 8423, report of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, rapporteur: Mr Staes). Text adopted by the Assembly on 22 June 1999 (19th Sitting).

11. The Parliamentary Assembly nevertheless notes that despite all this, little progress has been made in the member states of the Council of Europe.

12. The Assembly therefore invites its national delegations to urge their parliaments to introduce specific measures to correct the under-representation of women in political life, and in particular:

i. to set up parliamentary committees or delegations for women's rights and equal opportunities;

ii. to institute equal representation in political parties and to make their funding conditional upon the achievement of this objective;

iii. to adopt dispositions aiming to reconcile family and public life;

iv. to introduce legislation to create a system of equality education, beginning in elementary schooling, so as to ensure the same chances of access to all levels of training.

13. The Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers:

i. prepare a recommendation to the member states on equal representation in political and public life by means of specific instruments;

ii. institute a European ombudsman for the re-balancing of representation in order to promote the consolidation of "empowerment" and "mainstreaming", as defined in the Beijing Platform for Action, and their follow-up, and for co-ordinating all national equality organisations in the various member states;

iii. instruct the relevant steering committees to introduce an education programme in the field of equality

14. Furthermore, the Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers invite member states:

i. to implement the principle of equality and adopt special measures such as provided for by the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women;

ii. to implement the Platform for Action of the Beijing Conference;

iii. to set up a public structure to be responsible for equal opportunities, and a statistical system for monitoring the progress of equality policies in member states;

iv. to promote information campaigns aimed at changing attitudes regarding the importance for true democracy of women's participation in political life, and at the same time, to promote the sharing of responsibilities between both partners within the home.