



**Resolution 1706 (2010)<sup>1</sup>**

Final version

## Increasing women's representation in politics through the electoral system

Parliamentary Assembly

1. Equal participation of women and men in political life is one of the foundations of democracy and one of the goals of the Council of Europe, reaffirmed by the Organisation's Committee of Ministers as recently as May 2009.
2. Unfortunately, nearly thirty-five years after the first United Nations World Conference on Women in Mexico City, and nearly fifteen years after the fourth in Beijing, women remain grievously under-represented in politics. Women still hold less than 20% of parliamentary seats and ministerial portfolios worldwide, and less than 5% of heads of state are women. This under-representation constitutes a waste of talent, and also weakens democracy and human rights.
3. There are many factors which lead to women's under-representation in politics. The most important factor is probably the decade-old backlash against women's rights. In Europe, societies remain characterised by attitudes, customs and behaviour which disempower women in public life, discriminate against them, and hold them hostage to prescribed role-models and stereotypes according to which women are "not suited" to decision making and politics. Unsocial meeting hours and a lack of child-care facilities for politicians can further deter women candidates – politics is tailored to fit men who do not bear even a minimum share of family responsibilities and who rely on their wives to keep the household running.
4. The attitudes, customs and behaviour described above influence a country's institutional, party and electoral landscape; but conversely, a change in that landscape can also impact on society's attitudes. Changing the electoral system to one more favourable to women's representation in politics, in particular by adopting gender quotas, can lead to more gender-balanced, and thus more legitimate, political and public decision making. This was already recognised by the Committee of Ministers in its Recommendation Rec(2003)3 on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision making, and reaffirmed by the Parliamentary Assembly on several occasions – most recently when awarding its first Gender Equality Prize in September 2009.
5. However, changing the electoral system is not enough: to be really effective, this change must be accompanied by measures such as gender-sensitive civic education and the elimination of gender stereotypes and "built-in" bias against women candidates, in particular within political parties, but also within the media. In some Council of Europe member states, constitutions also need to be changed in order to accompany gender equality and anti-discrimination provisions with the necessary exception allowing positive discrimination measures for the under-represented sex, without them being considered a violation of the equality principle.

---

1. *Assembly debate* on 27 January 2010 (6th Sitting) (see [Doc. 12097](#), report of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, rapporteur: Mrs Err). *Text adopted by the Assembly* on 27 January 2010 (6th Sitting). See also [Recommendation 1899 \(2010\)](#).



6. The Assembly considers that the lack of equal representation of women and men in political and public decision making is a threat to the legitimacy of democracies and a violation of the basic human right of gender equality, and thus recommends that member states rectify this situation as a priority by:

6.1. associating the gender equality and anti-discrimination provisions in their constitutions and their electoral laws with the necessary exception allowing positive discrimination measures for the under-represented sex, if they have not done so already, as a precondition recognised by the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) of the Council of Europe;

6.2. fully implementing the recommendations contained in Committee of Ministers Recommendation Rec(2003)3, in Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1676 (2004) on women's participation in elections and Resolution 1489 (2006) on mechanisms to ensure women's participation in decision making, and in the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe's Recommendation 273 (2009) on equal access to local and regional elections, in particular as concerns changing electoral systems and introducing gender quotas;

6.3. reforming their electoral system to one more favourable to women's representation in parliament:

6.3.1. in countries with a proportional representation list system, consider introducing a legal quota which provides not only for a high proportion of female candidates (ideally at least 40%), but also for a strict rank-order rule (for example, a "zipper" system of alternating male and female candidates), and effective sanctions (preferably not financial, but rather the non-acceptance of candidacies/candidate lists) for non-compliance, ideally in combination with closed lists in a large constituency and/or a nation-wide district;

6.3.2. in countries with majority or plurality systems, consider introducing the principle of each party choosing a candidate amongst at least one female and one male nominee in each party district, or find other ways of ensuring increased representation of women in politics, such as, for example, applying innovative mandatory gender quotas within political parties, or "all-women shortlists" or "twinning" constituencies, again accompanied by effective sanctions for non-compliance;

6.4. limiting by law the number of political posts (at local, regional, national or European level) which can be held simultaneously;

6.5. encouraging political parties to voluntarily adopt gender quotas and to take other positive action measures, also within their own decision-making structures, and especially in the party structure responsible for nomination of candidates for elections;

6.6. accompanying these changes with measures such as gender-sensitive civic education and the elimination of gender stereotypes and "built-in" bias against women candidates, in particular within political parties, but also within the media and trade unions.