



The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

**Women in political
decision-making**
Slovenia, 15-16 June 2016

Comments Paper - Cyprus



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This publication is supported by the European Union Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020).

This programme is implemented by the European Commission and shall contribute to the further development of an area where equality and the rights of persons, as enshrined in the Treaty, the Charter and international human rights conventions, are promoted and protected.

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Women in political decision-making in Cyprus

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1. The Cyprus gender imbalance in political decision-making

1.1. National, local and European political representation

Women's representation in political decision-making positions is minimal, stagnant and consistently below the EU-28 average. Cyprus' score in the Gender Equality Index's (GEI) power domain is 16.9 (34.1 when considering only the political sub-domain), well below the average of 49.8 for the EU-28 in 2012. Internationally, Cyprus ranks 113th out of 189 countries in female parliamentary representation (IPU 2014) and 39th out of 47 states in the Council of Europe (COE 2012).

- The House of Representatives (HR), Municipal Councils and European Parliament (EP)

In 2015, women represented only 12.5 % (7 of 56)¹ of members of parliament, less than half the EU-28 average (29 %) and this number is stagnating since 2010. Cyprus held the penultimate position in the EU-28 until the recent elections of 22.5.2016 resulting in an increase to 19.64 % (11 of 56 and one female observer of the Roman Catholic Community). The actual number will decrease to 17.85 % following the resignation of one female member (Theocharous), in favour of her position at the EP. Despite what has been hailed as the highest female representation in Cypriot politics, the latest increase only improves Cyprus' ranking from 27th to 23rd (EIGE 2015 data), still remaining on the bottom group of EU-28. After the 2011 elections, the representation of women in municipal councils declined from 20.3 % to 17.9 % and for mayors from 3 % to 0 %.

In the 2014 EP elections, only one woman was elected out of 6 members, positioning Cyprus in the EU penultimate position, a decline from 2009, when one third of MEPs were women. The party EP candidate lists included 23 % female representation (down from 24 % in 2009).

- Cabinet ministers and appointments at high-ranking posts

Women's representation in national government as ministers has decreased from 33 % (highest ever) in 2012 to 0 % after the 2013 presidential elections. As of April 2013, the cabinet includes one woman as the Minister of Labour and Social Insurance (8 % in 2016). This ranks Cyprus on the bottom 6 Member States in the EU.

¹ The Greek-Cypriot community elects 56 and the Turkish-Cypriot community 24 members (seats currently vacant). The Maronite, Roman-Catholic and Armenian minorities have 3 observers.

Women hold a number of posts including the Commissioners for Law, Administration, Protection of Personal Data and Children's Rights. In 2014, women were also appointed in the positions of Commissioner for Public Service Reform (resigned), head of the Cyprus National Hydrocarbons Company, Chief at the National Gas Public Company DEFA, and chair of the State Fairs Authority.

- Political parties

There has never been a female leader or deputy leader of the major political parties: the most recent exception is Solidarity, a new party that participated in the 2016 elections, which was founded and headed by Eleni Theoharous.

1.2. Causes and factors of under-representation

A variety of factors explain the severe under-representation described above including:

- gender stereotypes, especially in the education system and mass media (MIGS 2011; ROC 2007);
- lack of reconciliation of family and professional life and inequality in division of family responsibilities (EKIF 2006; Pilavaki 2008, ROC 2007 CEDAW 2013);
- absence of reconciliation of family and professional life and lack of political support from government or civil society;
- patriarchal attitudes towards female politicians and structures of political parties, absence of support structures and financing of election campaigns;²
- non-supportive male political networks and 'insufficient media representation' (GMMP 2010; CEDAW 2013);³ and
- lack of political support from government or civil society of quotas which had been specifically included in the National Action Plan on Gender Equality (NAP) 2007-13.

² During the May 2016 parliamentary election campaign, the governing party's spokesman (DISY) publicly linked female candidates of his own party and beauty pageants. The incumbent spokesperson failed to secure a seat whereas the first-time female candidate gained wide name recognition and was elected MP. The comment caused a public reaction reflecting a changing public opinion.

³ Local media criticised the all-male ministerial Cabinet of February 2013, however, there was no reaction to the all-male board appointments for the Central Bank and for the peace negotiating team in the same year. A 2006 exit poll after the parliamentary elections concluded that the majority (55 %) did not vote for women for the following reasons: 61 % consider women more 'useful' within the family, 58 % view men more effective in politics and 55 % had not sufficient knowledge of the female candidates (EKIF 2006).

2. Policies and debate to promote balanced participation

2.1. The National Machinery for Women's Rights (NMWR)

There are no continuing measures to promote the balanced participation political elections. The NMWR as the main institution responsible gender equality policies, lacks resources and only organises occasional seminars (on EU Positive actions and good practices), press conferences and information campaigns prior to elections, such as the EP May 2014 elections. The sporadic campaigns not only have a limited effect but may have contributed to a 'backlash' in a society "averse to voting for women or promoting women 'because they are women'" (Panayiotou quoted in avlou 2015).⁴

2.2 The National Action Plan on Gender Equality (NAP)

The 2007-2013 NAP included specific measures and targets in promoting equal representation in decision-making (MIGS, 2011): 40 % female participation in political life, 30 % quotas for women in municipal, parliamentary and EP elections lists, and a 30 % quota for women in all public committees and boards appointments. The measures received low visibility and weak implementation (MIGS 2011). The subsequent 2014-17 NAP excluded all quota measures and merely included a recommendation for quota research. The reversal and regression in policy received no reaction.

2.3. Political parties' voluntary gender quotas

The Socialist party (EDEK) introduced a gender and youth quota in its 2000 Constitution within the party internal decision-making bodies. The Democratic Rally of Cyprus (DISY) has a 30 % gender quota in its parliamentary candidates, municipal and EP elections, and for internal party structures (QuotaProject 2014). The parties not implementing their own internal quota justify their actions by considering these quotas as not binding. In the recent May elections only 23 % of all candidates were female.

2.4. NGOs and Civil Society

Local NGOs such as the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS) organise seminars⁵ and campaigns such as the "European Campaign for Parity Democracy" with the European Women's Lobby (EWL) in order to promote the active participation of women as voters and candidates in the 2014 EP elections. Press releases also called for the adoption of gender quotas to address the democratic deficit (MIGS 2014). The impact of these types of seminars is limited and isolated with no follow up and dissemination.

⁴ See the Equality Authority (Office of the Ombudsperson) decision (AIT 2/2011) on the refusal of the Cyprus PBC to broadcast a TV film on female candidates during the 2011 parliamentary elections.

⁵ MIGS and EP Office in Cyprus "Equal Rights, Equal Voices: Women in Decision-Making in Cyprus and the EU."

2.5. The Group Initiative for strengthening the representation of women in political life (2015)

Despite limited effectiveness of the above initiatives, a new coalition is strengthening public discussion and making concrete steps in influencing policy. The Group Initiative of strengthening the representation of women in political life [Η Ομάδα Πρωτοβουλίας για την Ενίσχυση της Παρουσίας της Γυναίκας στην Πολιτική Ζωή] is a coalition of 15 prominent women representing parliamentarians, political parties, government, NGOs, public administration and academics. In a series of press conferences and interventions in the mass media, the group defined a quotas policy proposal with the following provisions: a. 'gender neutral' legislated quotas in the candidates' electoral ballots with a balance of at least 40 % of either sex; b. sanctions against unbalanced party lists by rejecting the party list and financial sanctions on the public grant for financing political parties; and c. the encouragement of all political parties to adopt voluntary quotas in their constitutions, candidate lists and ensure the nomination of female candidates in 'winnable' seats.

Within a year, a smaller group of women in the Coalition⁶ prepared a legislative proposal on the adoption of 30 % quotas for the boards of semi-governmental organisations (SGOs). Four political parties of the right and centre (DHSY, DHKO, EDEK and the Greens) backed the proposal. The second biggest opposition party on the Left (AKEL) rejected the proposal. Popular⁷ AKEL MP Irini Charalambidou was one of the harshest critics and attacked of quotas in the mass media as 'undemocratic, authoritarian, sexist, racist and insulting'⁸. The last plenary session of April 14 2016 before dissolution for the May elections, the House of Representatives passed the first bill into law introducing gender quotas (30 % of either gender) in the Boards of all SGOs.

3. Transferability Aspects

The Slovenian and French good practices present a high transferability potential for Cyprus, despite differences in the political context, the evolution of gender equality policies, the electorate size and electoral system.⁹ The longer history of under-representation in Slovenia and France emphasises the effectiveness of binding legislation when other 'soft' policies fail redressing the deficit. A novice like Cyprus can benefit from the French and Slovenian experience gained in initiation and implementation of legislated quotas. Cyprus shares the history of stagnation but unlike Slovenia and France, has only introduced its first quota legislation for the appointment of SGOs Boards¹⁰ in April 2016.

⁶ The proposal was submitted by S. Pavlou (Director of MIGS and EWL President), A. Koukkides-Procopiou (Women of Europe AIPFE President), D. Kalogirou (Exchange and Securities Commission Chair), A. Papadopoulou (Lawyer) and X. Constantinou (Women's Organisation, Democratic Rally President).

⁷ Charalambidou was the winner of the May 26 parliamentary elections by securing the highest number of preferential votes among all candidates nationally.

⁸ <http://cyprusnews.eu/eirini-charalampidou/4172502-2016-03-07-23-11-57.html> on 8.3.2015

⁹ Cyprus is divided into 6 multi-member constituencies with a List PR electoral system. Voters select the list of a single party (or coalition of parties or isolated independent candidate); within the list, voters mark one preference for every four seats to be filled in their constituency.

¹⁰ There are currently 12 semi-governmental organisations promoting public interest objectives and Board appointments have been highly politicised by each successive government.

3.1. Quotas and constitutional amendment

Unlike the Slovenian political elites who drew lessons from the French experience on electoral gender parity laws (Gaber 2016, 8), Cyprus legislators have already ‘fallen into the first trap.’ The Slovenian good practice based on the French parity laws focused first on amending the Constitution, before introducing legislated quotas. Cyprus did not learn either from France or Slovenia and rushed to introduce its first quota legislation without first addressing the Constitutional amendment.

Justice Minister Ionas Nicolaou had already warned a month before the quota bill passage, that quota inclusions makes the bill “constitutionally vulnerable” (in the Legal affairs Parliamentary Committee with consultation of the Attorney-general). In fact, the rush to pass a number of bills during the last session of the HR resulted in 16 bills being vetoed by the President. Currently, the Law on quotas in SGOs Boards is referred to the Supreme Court (June 2016); the decision could require either a constitutional amendment prior to quotas; or exclude the use of quotas from the bill, as suggested in the legislature transforming it perhaps into another ‘soft’ measure of promoting gender equality.

3.2. Coalition Building

One successful element in the Slovenian good practice was the creation of the nationwide network Coalition for Parity and cross-party coalitions of the women’s groups within political parties to overcome the parties’ inaction. In the Cypriot case, the women’s sections within parties have been subordinated to party structures and not served so far as independent and active policy fora. Voluntary internal party quotas have not contributed to increasing female representation. Legislated quotas with sanctions such as the French doubling of the financial penalty (2014Vallaud-Belkacem Act) could contribute to change. This is relevant in a small country like Cyprus with an increasing number of political parties needing to share the public party financing. The 2015 Cypriot women’s Coalition which very efficiently submitted the first quota legislation would benefit from extending and enlarging its membership. Compared to the 200-member Slovenian Parity Coalition, Cyprus consists only of 15 women, no listed male supporters and poor representation of cross-party female MPs. The bitter opposition of the largest party of the left against legislated quotas severely limits the Cypriot case and contrasts with the French and Slovenian cases where left-wing parties were the strongest supporters.

3.3. External leverage and policy windows of opportunity

Another transferability aspect from the Slovenian good practice for Cyprus is the external “leverage” offered by the 2004 EU accession to motivate and speed change. Cyprus’ EU accession had also offered that “leverage”, however, only in the context of the *acquis* and gender equality policies in employment. The on-going peace negotiations to create new institutional bi-communal structures, could provide the forum to initiate policies benefiting both communities. The 2015 establishment of the Technical Committee on Gender Equality could play that role although constitutional questions are discussed in a separate committee and the possibility of cross-committee cooperation is unclear.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

In Cyprus, voluntary internal political party quotas are insufficient in promoting women in political decision-making. Legislated “gender neutral” quotas following the Slovenian and French good practices are needed in order to advance gender equality in political life. Addressing the constitutional amendments is important as an initial stage to resolve the vetoed quota law on SGOs and future quota laws for party lists at all levels of elections. Other measures such as awareness raising, campaign finance assistance and trainings can only serve as secondary measures to the primary need of binding legislated quotas. At a European level, the EU leverage that was successful in Slovenia could offer external support needed for strengthening and promoting national policymakers’ efforts.

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