

No EU democracy without gender equality

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Opinion

When it comes to gender equality, so far the EU has been all talk and no action, writes Madi Sharma.



The expectations from the newly appointed European commission have been high, especially considering the challenges that it will be called to address and a great deal of yet unfinished work left behind by the previous team.

The hearings of the commissioner designates before the European parliament were a good opportunity to learn more about the priorities of the new commissioners and a 'stress test' before full deployment of the policy agenda of the new commission within the next five year term.

One of the most interesting hearings, and one of the most awaited from civil liberties and equality advocates, was the presentation of Věra Jourová, the new commissioner for justice, consumer protection and gender equality. The dossier Jourová has been assigned covers a broad spectrum of issues, gender equality being top of the agenda in a commission with only nine women.

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Speaking before MEPs, the Czech official expressed that gender equality will be her top priority. She vowed to complete the 'unfinished business' with regards to the women on boards directive and secure an efficient policy that will provide for the elimination of the gender pay gap within the union.

Recent statistics indicate that the progress on women in the decision making process in the EU is lagging behind, including in many developing countries. Domestic violence remains an unaddressed issue and the gender pay gap keeps widening, especially since austerity measures were put in place. The EU has failed to collect comparable data across the EU on female entrepreneurship, despite US figures highlighting that the majority of businesses and jobs created since 2008 stemmed from companies owned by women. Sadly, the economic and social arguments for gender balance in society still fail to impress European policymakers.

However, some positive steps have been taken at member state level. Last month, the German government parties agreed to set a gender quota requiring at least 30 per cent of the positions on boards of publically traded companies to be filled by women by 2016. The federal minister of family affairs Manuela Schwesig said, "I am convinced that this law will bring about a cultural shift in the working world. Only after equality has prevailed at the company's head - whether in the private economy or public service - will it trickle down to take effect in lower levels. When there are noticeably more females in leadership positions, young women and girls will be able to see that it is possible for them to rise to top position".

EU leaders must realise that the time has come to move beyond words and implement the gender roadmap for equality in the European Union. The administration must lead by example, ensuring gender balance at all levels of the decision making processes in Brussels and beyond. The corporate world and civil society can then be asked to follow. Women are competent, educated, skilled and bring diversity of thinking, an essential requirement for sustainable growth and innovative solutions to bring the EU out of recession. We need to provide women with training, incentives, role models and the right messages to support the balance in society a fully functioning democracy requires.

About the author

Madi Sharma is a member of the European economic and social committee's employers group

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