

EU election candidates urged to join fight against sexual harassment

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News

A campaign has been launched aimed at encouraging candidates in May's European elections to help tackle sexual harassment.



Photo Credit: European Parliament

Anyone standing as a candidate in the EU-wide poll will be asked to sign a 10-point “Time’s Up” pledge committing to fight sexual harassment in Parliament and the EU institutions “concretely”.

The pledge was launched at a conference in Parliament on Wednesday. It will be disseminated to candidates by various means, including social media.

Among those speaking was EU Ombudsman Emily O’Reilly, who said, “What is needed above all is a

cultural change and this is never easy. But by continuing to name abusive behaviour – to end its normalisation - and to put rules and procedures in place to deal with it, the EU institutions can encourage that cultural shift.”

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“As the EU elections approach, its institutions need to be seen to be leading by example as the most modern, ethical administration possible,” she added.

The launch comes days after MEPs adopted new rules that require members to refrain from “improper behaviour”, “offensive language” and psychological or sexual harassment.

The ten commitments MEP candidates must agree to include “ending the culture of silence” said to surround the issue and the “tendency to blame victims of sexual harassment instead of the perpetrators.”

EXCUSE OF IMMUNITY

Another demand calls for the creation of “one accessible, effective and fully independent structure” to deal with harassment in Parliament, while another of the ten pledges says future deputies “must never accept the excuse of immunity” and “ensure dissuasive sanctions for acts of sexual harassment.”

“By continuing to name abusive behaviour – to end its normalisation - and to put rules and procedures in place to deal with it, the EU institutions can encourage that cultural shift” EU Ombudsman Emily O’Reilly

Prospective members must also agree to work to ensure that Parliament “sets the example and leads the way in setting standards.”

Me Too EP, a Parliament-based group set up a year ago in the wake of allegations of sexual harassment allegedly suffered by interns and, mostly, female parliamentary assistants – often at the hands of MEPs – is behind the campaign.

Over 1,000 people signed a petition last year urging full implementation of the 2017 Parliament resolution on combating sexual harassment and abuse.

However, the conference was told that, so far, this has not yet been fully implemented.

In response, the group stepped up its efforts, collecting anonymous testimonies in order to “break the

culture of silence” said to exist around the issue.

GENDER AS A HANDICAP

O’Reilly gave her support for the election pledge, adding, “As a woman who began her working life in the early 1980s and in the then highly conservative country of Ireland, I was shocked at the extent to which so many women - in 2019 - continue to be subjected to a spectrum of abuse that runs from casual sexist comments to actual physical violence.”

She told participants, “So many women continue to bear their gender as a handicap, to navigate the world as a potentially dangerous place, never to feel that ease and freedom in the world that is gifted to men as a birth right.”

“Sexual harassment in the workplace is not isolated but a cultural thing, which is why we have to also look at the root causes behind such activity ... The new rules of procedure adopted by MEPs last week is a positive move of course, but a lot more still needs to be done” **Birgit Van Hout, UN Human Rights, Brussels**

“And for so long, we - woman as well as men - have taken this for granted, this is the way the world is, this is for us as women to manage as best we can and hope that we will come to no harm. The advent of social media has also intensified the abuse for all genders in a world where private sanctuaries are increasingly rare.”

The Irish official added, “All EU institutions and agencies have anti-harassment policies in place, but the main issue we identified is the low number of complaints being filed.”

Underreporting, she said, suggests that the “old” culture of silence still lingers, adding, “There is not yet a fully-shared acceptance of what constitutes harassment and consequently no shared outrage when it happens. At worst, the victim can be deemed part of the problem. The low number of cases being reported is a pity but hardly surprising. Harassment is not like having your handbag stolen.

“It isn’t neatly defined, it encourages others to evaluate you as a likely or unlikely victim of harassment, it risks further sexualising you in cases of sexual abuse, and there is the risk of being branded as trouble, as difficult, with the inevitable consequence for one’s career. It should not take a demonstration of great and solitary bravery to deal with this.”

The Ombudsman said, “People who have been harassed need support, need safe avenues through which they can navigate their complaints and the task of the institutions is to create those safe avenues.”

BACKLASH

Another speaker, Birgit Van Hout, regional representative for the UN Human Rights Office in Brussels, said efforts to tackle the issue within the organisation had met with a “backlash” from some male employees who had complained of “reverse discrimination.”

She said, “I want to stress the essential role of leadership in tackling this. Sexual harassment in the workplace is not isolated but a cultural thing, which is why we have to also look at the root causes behind such activity.”

She added, “The new rules of procedure adopted by MEPs last week is a positive move of course, but

a lot more still needs to be done.”

Beatrice Fresko-Rolfo spoke about her experience as one of 24 MPs in the Monaco parliament, saying, “One third of these are women and the vice president is a woman. But only one of the 11 committees is chaired by a woman.”

She is general rapporteur on violence against women for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (CoE) and also said that “having more women active in Parliament provides a means of changing the atmosphere at work.”

She cited the results of a CoE survey showing that “sexism, abuses of power and violence against women” exists in all CoE member parliaments.

The European Parliament has started training for members on combating sexism and Fresko-Rolfo said this is “indispensable to start a change of attitudes.”

Several speakers, however, bemoaned the fact that such training is only voluntary and called for training to be mandatory in parliament.

NAMING AND SHAMING

Charlotte Balavoine, a political advisor for the GUE group in Parliament, said that many of those responsible in the past had been MEPs themselves and that “naming and shaming” alleged culprits may be the only solution.

She said some MEPs felt protected by “total impunity” to any such wrongdoing while victims were still afraid of speaking out for fear of losing their job.

Belgian psychotherapist Angelo Colabufalo initially caused some concern when he introduced himself as a “predator” who “struggled to control his feelings” towards women on a daily basis.

He later revealed his true identity, saying that his initial comments were designed to illustrate the need to work with perpetrators of sexual harassment and abuse.

About the author

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