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TESTO 6

WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING

ASPASIA FORUM on equal opportunities in Italy and the rest of Europe

Venice, Italy, 15 November 2003

Speech by Anna Diamantopoulou, Commissioner responsible for Employment and Social Affairs

Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I am addressing this important Forum organised by the Italian presidency. It gives me the opportunity to take stock of the current situation of women in decision-making positions, our actions to remedy this important democratic deficit and to propose some further actions.

More than 130 years ago, women started to organise to attain the right to vote and to stand for elections; in short to become full citizens with equal rights and responsibilities. We all know that the battle for the right to vote was long and difficult. During the debates in England in the 1870's, many MPs voiced opinions much like that of Beresforth Hope, who held the view that:

"Reason predominates in the man, emotion and sympathy in women..." and while fearing that women could dominate parliament, he continued with great conviction: *"Our legislation would develop hysterical and spasmodic features, partaking more of the French and American system than reproducing the interests of the English parliament."*

Today, such views are considered scandalous. And of course, to the benefit of society, reason won over prejudice and women today share equal political rights. However in practice, we are still far away from claiming to have reached parity in numbers and influence. There are simply not enough women in high political decision-making posts to ensure that women's perspectives are fully and adequately represented in all areas of life - despite some significant progress in the 1990's.

SOME FIGURES

From 1991 to 1999, the number of women in the European Parliament increased from 19 per cent to 30 per cent, in the European Commission from 10 to 25 per cent and in the Member States governments from 11 to 23 per cent.

However, while these figures denote an average, great differences between countries can be observed. Our most recent figures (from this year) show that seven of the 15 Member States have 30 per

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cent women in their parliaments (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Austria); and 7 have less than 20 per cent (Portugal, Luxembourg, the UK, Ireland, France – Italy and Greece have less than 10).

At governmental level, greater progress has been made. Only four of the Member States have less than 20 per cent women in their governments; even more positive is the fact that several countries have broken or are close to breaking the 30 per cent threshold. However, this progress is disproportionately small when compared to the various efforts at national and European level. Yet without such efforts, there is doubt that we would have had much progress at all. It teaches us that the presence of women in decision-making is by far not considered a natural state of affairs – that it still requires specific actions and tools – and yes – also legislation in some instances.

Let me now turn to some of our past actions aimed at increasing the number of women in decision-making and identify three phases that contributed to the present situation:

- 1) The phase of data collection and analysis of the electoral systems;
- 2) development of tools including the use of quota systems
- 3) specific electoral campaigns aimed at increasing the number of women candidates and the mobilisation of women voters.

THE FIRST PHASE: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSES

As regards data collection and the analyses of the different electoral systems as to how they help or hinder women's participation, little had been done before the 1990's.

Understanding the state of play was one of the core preoccupation of successive community action programmes on equal opportunities from 1991 onwards. Under the third action programme for equal opportunities (1991-1995), the European Commission created an expert network on women in decisionmaking, which built the basis for the regular monitoring of women in decision-making in the European Union. In addition, it contributed to establishing a framework for further actions, which were enshrined in the Athens Declaration of 1992 and the Charter of Rome of 1996.

It is fair to say, then, that these actions were and are essential stepping stones for further political initiatives.

Moreover, analyses from the period of the early 90's also revealed that we had to move away from some popularly held assumptions that women themselves were reluctant and oftentimes not well enough trained to "deserve" the highest decision-making levels.

Other structural factors came to the surface – not least the power within what is generally referred to as the "old boys networks" – but also difficulties associated with reconciling family, professional and political life, party structures themselves as well as electoral systems.