

Positive action towards equality for women and men in politics

The concept of equality can be seen in its continuous evolvement in society. Such development varies along the years. Currently progress towards equality between women and men in the European Union is being achieved at a slow pace. Gender equality in political decision-making is still one of the challenging areas and in Malta the pace of progress is even slower if not at a standstill.

In view of this, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) is again working to raise awareness on this issue through its campaign '*Gender Balance in Politics: Time for Action*'.

Women's participation in public life has evolved, from the achievement of the right to vote in 1947 to an increasing participation in the judiciary in 2018. Nonetheless, the persistent gender imbalance in political participation is still hindering the equal representation and participation of women and men in a democratic state.

The Maltese Parliament is composed of 57 men and only 10 women. Not much progress since 2005 when 9% of the members of parliament were women compared to 14.9% today. In view of such slow progress in this field the status quo that is hindering positive change needs to be questioned and evaluated.

One of the main challenges in Malta is the lack of women candidates running for elections that results in a gender imbalance in politics. This in spite of the fact that a Eurobarometer study found that the Maltese have the highest perception across the EU Member States that there should be more women in political decision-making.

Positive action is necessary to address the differences and unequal relations between women and men that initiate from structural discrimination in society, to encourage a wider participation of the underrepresented group and compensate for the disadvantages experienced by such group, in this case women. The Equality for Men and Women Act allows for *measures of positive action for the purpose of achieving substantive equality for men and women*.

In the political sphere, different forms of positive action can be taken to empower more women to actively participate and run for elections. In many countries all over the world quotas have been used/are being used successfully as part of a wider strategy to bring about gender balanced representation in their parliament. For instance, in France, political parties are required to present an equivalent number of female and male candidates in constituency based elections and to have gender parity on all candidate lists in the closed list elections at regional, municipality and European level elections with respective sanctions for non-compliance. The main actors that contributed towards such change in the French legislation were associations and politicians promoting parity democracy, the media, and public opinion.

Similarly, Slovenia legislated for gender quotas in elections at local, national and European levels and the number of women in politics significantly increased as a result. In order to achieve such change, a key civil society platform that included prominent individuals and parliamentarians promoted gender-balanced representation in public life. The media also played a key role and initiatives were taken to facilitate women's visibility in the media.

In addition, besides legislative quotas, Portugal uses the zipper principle whereby women and men candidates are alternated on the lists of candidates. Moreover, in other countries positive action



National Commission for the Promotion of Equality

measures were taken bringing women together through networks and interest groups to influence policy and give more attention to the issue; providing training and mentoring for women; initiating debate and raising awareness; promoting gender equality in political parties; and initiating voluntary quotas in the political parties' structures.

In Malta, the two main political parties have adopted voluntary measures so that more women are present within their internal party structures. Such commitment by the political parties needs to be further strengthened to enhance equal opportunities for candidates running for elections. Particularly, in 2017, the Labour party launched the initiative LEAD which mentors and trains women with the aim to increase Labour's female candidates to 50% in the 2027 General Election.

NCPE also carried out a mentoring programme in 2015 for Maltese women aspiring to advance in their careers and hold decision-making positions. Additionally, NCPE developed a Directory of Professional Women which gives further visibility and opportunities to professional and competent women for appointment on boards and committees and/or to assume decision-making positions, including in the political field.

Awareness raising on the importance of enabling women and men to equally participate in political decision-making processes is essential in a democratic framework given that gender-balanced participation in politics contributes to an equal representation of views and experiences required to enhance democratic processes. Positive action measures can contribute to accelerate progress towards reaching gender-balance in politics, addressing the persistent democratic deficit and strengthening equality in society at large.

NCPE looks forward to seeing an increase in the number of women candidates in the coming elections that would address the lacuna that Malta has been facing for a considerable number of years.

Further information on the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality is available on www.equality.gov.mt