

Women and their rightful place... in Parliament

At present, there are 10 women and 57 men in the Maltese Parliament with gender balance being manifestly absent. In view that a gender-balanced participation is essential for a functioning society and for democracy, such a persistent gender imbalance in Parliament needs to be addressed.

It is for this reason that 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*'.

Having more women in politics is a need for an effective and convincing democracy, given that the development of laws, policies and political agendas have to include the expertise, views and experiences of all those who will be affected be they women or men.

Women in Malta were granted the right to vote and the right to stand for elections in 1947, while men (of means) were granted this right in 1921. Since 1947 Malta has had two (2) female and seven (7) male presidents whilst 946 men and 59 women were elected in the general elections throughout the years. These numbers refer to the candidatures rather than to the candidates as a considerable number of the elected men and women were elected more than once.

The Gender Equality Index published by the European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE) reports that despite the progress made, women are still under-represented in positions of power in the political, economic and social domains. In Malta women's representation in the political domain has been consistently among the lowest in EU 28. It is about time that such a lacuna in Maltese society is addressed.

The laws of Malta provide for strengthening equality on the basis of sex. The Constitution of Malta allows for "special measures aimed at accelerating *de facto* equality between men and women". Moreover, the 1995 UN Beijing Conference on Women even called for governments to "ensure equal representation of women at all decision-making levels in national and international institutions".

One positive measure that contributes towards gender balance in politics are gender quotas, defined by EIGE as a "positive measurement instrument aimed at accelerating the achievement of gender-balanced participation and representation by establishing a defined proportion (percentage) or number of places or seats to be filled by, or allocated to, women and/or men, generally under certain rules or criteria".¹ Quotas seek to increase the representation of the underrepresented sex, in Malta's case the women in politics, to ensure that women at least constitute a 'critical minority' for instance of 30 or 40 per cent.

Half of the countries of the world today use some type of electoral quota to achieve a gender balance representation in parliament². Quotas can entail reserved seats which regulate the number of women elected; legal candidate quotas which is a legal requirement that sets a minimum for the share of women on the candidate lists; or else political party quotas, which can be a voluntary or mandatory measure, written into the statutes of individual political parties. The rank order of women and men in the candidate lists can also determine whether nominated women are placed in a position with a real chance of being elected.

¹ <http://eige.europa.eu/rdc/thesaurus/terms/1203>

² <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/quotas>

A study carried out by NCPE in 2015 “Gender Quotas and other measures towards a Gender-Balanced Representation in Decision-Making” covering 1,017 participants, made up of 513 women and 504 men, found that 65% (663) of the respondents from the general public agreed with the introduction of electoral quotas. Moreover, a 2017 Eurobarometer study demonstrates that 78% of respondents from Malta are in favour of legal measures to ensure parity between women and men in politics, compared to 70% EU average.

Some countries use quotas as a temporary measure until the barriers for women’s entry into politics are removed and a gender-balanced participation is achieved. Despite the fact that electoral quotas can lead to significant leaps in women’s political representation, nonetheless quotas in themselves cannot remove all the other barriers faced. In this regard, electoral quotas are meaningful when they form part of a wider package of measures that promote gender equality in this sphere and address specific barriers.

In particular, gender stereotypes related to specific roles within the family linking women’s achievements only with family life rather than with a career still prevail. In addition, lack of adequate work-life balance measures makes it harder for persons with caring responsibilities, particularly women, to be active in the political sphere.

The costs of electoral campaigns can be more of a challenge for women in view that they are less likely to have well remunerated jobs as can be seen in the workings of the gender pay gap. Moreover, women are likely to invest the money earned to address the needs of their family. Apart from difficulties to access resources, women may also lack the contacts necessary for an effective campaign.³

Equal opportunities in capacity building and empowerment for prospective candidates also contribute to strengthen skills required for a positive campaign. Successful candidates also require party backing and adequate visibility especially since incumbents, the majority of whom are men, often seek re-election and thus electable seats are limited. All these obstacles can lead to additional hurdles for women finding their way in the political field.

Cultural change is slow and difficult, however it all depends on the commitments, which are translated into actions and measures that are subsequently implemented. Quotas are one of the measures that can increase the participation of women in politics. Appropriate quota measures, alongside other initiatives that mainstream gender equality in the political sphere contribute towards enhanced gender equality in Parliament for the benefit of the whole of society.

Addressing the structural discrimination that exists in Maltese society should result in an increase in the number of women candidates in the coming elections. NCPE looks forward to more gender balanced electoral results in the coming year.

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

³ <https://www.osce.org/odihr/126803?download=true>, p.13