

Press Statement

Broader reform than a gender-corrective mechanism required for Gender Balanced Parliament

In the context of the ongoing debate about the representation of women in Parliament, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) emphasises that a gender-corrective mechanism is only one element of the reforms necessary to achieve Gender Balance in the House of Representatives. Such reforms recognise the need to address the structural obstacles to political participation experienced by women and delineates several actions required to achieve this aim. Since the allocation of additional Parliamentary seats will kick in when the under-represented sex obtains a percentage of less than 40%, this mechanism would not be necessary were political parties and institutions more effective in increasing the participation by women in political life by, for example, electing more women in leadership positions and in key internal organisations within the parties themselves and were parties to field gender-balanced candidates' lists.

Regarding the proposal currently being debated in the House, some are arguing that political parties and government should address this issue through other means rather than by a corrective mechanism as is being proposed. It is interesting to note that over the last 70 years during which political parties and Government have had the opportunity to take action, in spite of various calls from the NCPE and NGOs working in the equality field, it is only now that robust attention has been raised in the different media. Previously, few voices made themselves heard about the widely-acknowledged and much needed change. Possibly, this is one achievement of the proposed reform.

Notwithstanding, the on-going debate needs to put much more emphasis on the fact that the low participation of women in politics is rooted in historical and structural inequalities that disadvantage women, including pervasive gender stereotypes, lack of family-friendly arrangements and a male-dominated political sphere. The Gender Balance in Parliament Reform puts forward proposals to various stakeholders, including political parties, to address these barriers and involve more women in politics.

Whilst recognising measures adopted by political parties to increase female political participation, the NCPE has, over the past years, put forward recommendations to support political parties to address the factors that make politics unattractive for many women, including:

- Endeavouring to attract women to the political sphere and field women candidates by providing more structures within parties that are family-friendly;
- Integrating a gender concern in all operations of the party, including their work, policies and structures;

- Avoiding gender stereotypes and actively striving to have women represented in all policy areas and levels of the party;
- Ensuring that the necessary resources, including financial ones, are available to women for effective campaigning and other work;
- Making sure that women are given adequate speaking slots in public events and media appearances.

The Gender Balance in Parliament Reform also acknowledges the need to reform Parliamentary operations via a Gender Equality Strategic Plan which looks at factors such as the time of Parliamentary sittings, the possibility of having full-time Parliamentarians and the provision of childcare facilities for MPs. The Speaker has announced that a place for a childcare centre for parent Parliamentarians has been identified. The NCPE augurs that such a centre will open in the near future.

But more importantly, our society, including people in important positions, should question the current status quo that we live in - a patriarchal status quo that fails to give credence to women's proven abilities and work in both the public and private life, but rather continues to harp on the traditional soft portrayal of women in our society.

The NCPE reiterates that the persistently low participation of women in political decision-making creates an incomplete democracy where half of the population is heavily and consistently under-represented. A concerted effort by different actors and at different levels is needed to remove the social barriers which keep women out of politics. If Malta is successful in this endeavour, the gender-corrective mechanism will not even be necessary.

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