

LXXI COSAC

Brussels, 24-26 March 2024

BACKGROUND NOTE

Session II - Gender policy and the representation of women and men in parliament

Current situation and context

A gender policy is a set of guidelines, measures, or strategies adopted by parliaments and international organisations with the aim of promoting equality between women and men and fighting against gender-based discrimination. Gender policies generally cover a wide range of actions and involve all areas of society, such as education, the working environment, health, and politics.

These policies aim to reduce inequalities in terms of access to rights and opportunities; strengthen democracy by promoting gender-balanced representation; prevent gender-based violence; optimise resources; and improve economic well-being. Ultimately, they help to build a more inclusive society.

Historically, gender policies have been an integral part of the genesis of the European Union. Actually, article 119 of the Treaty of Rome already provided for equal pay for men and women. This article has also become a symbol of the fight for gender pay equality in the history of European integration, thanks to Eliane Vogel-Polsky, who devoted a large part of her legal career to making this article directly applicable in national legal systems (*Defrenne v. Sabena* ruling by the Court of Justice of the European Union).

Gender equality, pure and simple, was later enshrined in the Social Protocol (1992) annexed to the Maastricht Treaty in 1997, as well as in the Charter of Fundamental Rights adopted in 2000. That year also saw the initial introduction of the Strategy for Equality between men and women: a five-year European Commission strategy to promote gender equality in all areas of EU action and to support Member States in their efforts. To achieve these goals the [2020-2025 strategy](#) also aims to support equal participation in all areas of the economy and to achieve gender balance in decision-making and politics.

Representation of women and men in parliament

Despite a number of initiatives and significant advances over the years, women are still under-represented in the European Union's national parliaments. For the year 2023, according to the Gender Equality Index of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), gender equality in the European Union reached an average of 70.2 points. In 2023, according to the Institute, the proportion of women in the European Union's national parliaments was 33 points.

This is why national parliaments, the European Parliament, and bodies such as the EIGE are striving, through action plans, resolutions, awareness-raising campaigns, and various other instruments, to eliminate existing inequalities and promote the balanced representation of women and men in parliament.

For example, each year the administration of the European Parliament prepares a publication on women in the European Parliament, which contains statistics on the gender balance at various levels of political and administrative representation.

In addition, the European Parliament's High-Level Group on Gender Equality and Diversity reports twice a year to the Bureau on the implementation of the actions included in the action plan for gender equality.

The European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) regularly prepares a report on gender mainstreaming in the European Parliament, the latest of which was adopted as a European Parliament resolution on 10 March 2022.

The EIGE, for its part, promotes toolkits for making an institution more gender sensitive. These tools can also help to achieve a more gender-sensitive parliament, step by step, by means of self-assessment, a rating system and an interpretation of a parliament's gender sensitivity, making it possible to objectively measure the policies and interventions aimed at strengthening equality between women and men in the parliamentary work.

Initiatives by the Spain-Belgium-Hungary trio and the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union

The presidency trio of the Council of the European Union committed to advancing gender equality in Europe in a joint declaration in July 2023, at the start of the Spanish Presidency. Subsequently signed on 27 February 2024, in Brussels, under the Belgian Presidency, this declaration is in line with the 18-month gender programmes successively adopted since 2007. It sets out commitments in the areas of justice, the economy, education, and culture.

Informal summit on gender policies

An important date in the context of the Presidency was 27 February 2024, when the ministers responsible for gender equality, representatives of the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Women's Lobby, and the European Institute for Gender Equality met in Brussels. The aim of this informal summit was to take stock of achievements, opportunities, and challenges ahead, and to consider ways of strengthening the institutional mechanisms for implementing the future European agenda for gender equality. The central issues of the meeting revolved around the link between gender equality and the economic, ecological, and digital transitions, and the strengthening of institutional mechanisms for gender equality policy.

At this summit, stakeholders supported the growing visibility of these issues, and the Presidency will therefore raise them at a formal Employment and Social Affairs summit on 7 May 2024.

Parliamentary dimension of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union

In view of the above, and as part of the parliamentary dimension of the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, it is proposed that, following the debate that will have taken place on the subject of the representation of men and women in parliaments, a "Joint Declaration of the Representatives of European Parliaments on Gender Equality in Politics" will be adopted.

This text is based on the declarations discussed within the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and takes into consideration the results of the second chapter of COSAC's 41st Bi-annual Report. The chapter of the Contribution dealing with gender policy, as adopted by COSAC, will be integrated into the Joint Declaration.

The "Joint Declaration of the Representatives of the European Parliaments on Gender Equality in Politics" will be submitted to the COSAC delegations for signature following approval of the Contribution.

Discussion points:

- To what extent is there a balanced representation of women and men in national parliaments?
- What practical measures can be put in place to ensure that women have equal access to political office?
- How can gender equality in political life be promoted?
- How can we eliminate the structural and cultural obstacles that limit women's participation in political life?

- How can we eliminate discrimination and obstacles to women's political participation?
- How can we combat gender stereotypes in politics?
- How can we ensure a balance between private and public life in politics?
- How can best practices be exchanged between parliamentary institutions?