

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>ECE Beijing+20 Regional Review Meeting 6-7 November 2014, Palais des Nations, Geneva</b></p>
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**Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls  
for sustainable Development in the ECE region  
Panel 6: 'Women's representation in policy and decision-making : Overview of  
achievements, challenges and the way forward'**

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Madam, Mr Chairperson,  
Dear Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

## **1. Introduction**

It is an honour and a pleasure for me to participate in this panel, which addresses the issues relating to women's participation in decision-making in the region, including women's leadership in politics.

I am grateful to UN Women for this opportunity and to the Belgian Government for having put forward my name as an expert for this panel.

My contribution to this panel will focus on the way to increase women's participation in decision-making and political leadership.

Although there has been noticeable progress since 1995, women's participation in decision-making remains far below parity.

In the EU-28 less than one third of members of Parliament and Government are women. And in general, women's participation in political decision-making is higher than their weight or presence at the top of the corporate world and other large organisations, the highest courts of law and academia.

## **2. How to increase women's participation in political decision-making**

In recent years we have seen a growing trend of using gender quota as a policy tool for increasing women's participation and representation worldwide.

Allow me to start by referring to good practices in my own country: Belgium. For 20 years now, we have chosen to adopt gender quota legislation, targeting both political and governmental bodies as well as corporations.

In 1994 a first gender quota act was adopted in Belgium and strengthened in 2002, stipulating that electoral lists must count an equal number of female and male candidates. Moreover, candidates at the top two positions on an electoral list must be of different sex. The sanction for non-compliance is rejection of the list for the upcoming election. This legislation has had an impressive impact. Looking at the federal elections since 1994, the proportion of women serving as a Member of Parliament has improved from 12 % to 39 % for the House of Representatives and from 22,5 % to 50 % for the Senate.

Nor is Belgium an exception within the ECE-region: 17 other Member States have adopted electoral gender quotas (Albania, Armenia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Uzbekistan). Voluntary quotas have been introduced by political parties in many other Member States.

The adoption of such stringent measures still sparks debate and was on the agenda of the 20th Meeting of Women Parliamentarians at the 131st IPU Assembly in Geneva (October 2014), to discuss the findings of a new publication: 'Atlas of Gender Quotas'. (The publication is based on country-specific information contained in a global database ([www.quotaproject.org](http://www.quotaproject.org)), and is a joint initiative of The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), IPU and Stockholm University.)

This publication provides a number of important insights:

- To date, gender quotas have proved to be the single most effective tool for 'fast-tracking' women's representation in elected bodies of government.
- Of the 37 countries in the world that have more than 30 % of women parliamentarians in their lower or single house of parliament, only 7 (19%) do not use any type of quota; 14 (38%) use legislated candidate quotas, ten (27%) use voluntary party quotas and six (16%) use a reserved seat system.
- These are also the key three types of quota in politics: legislative candidate quotas, legislated reserved seats and party quotas, also called voluntary quotas.
- However, quotas must meet certain conditions in order to be meaningful and effective.
  - First, they should include a specific measurable numerical target within a defined time frame.
  - Secondly, they should be accompanied by well-designed quota rules, such as ranking-order rules and placement mandates that match the country's electoral system, ballot structure and list type.
  - And third, the system should include sanctions for non-compliance.
- Of course, electoral gender quotas do not remove all structural, institutional and social barriers (such as stereotypes) for women in politics, and need to be accompanied by other measures.

### **3. How to increase women's participation in other areas of decision-making in the public and private sector**

We learn from different sources that gender quotas or targets as a policy instrument have been successfully introduced in a number of areas in the ECE-Region : for public advisory (Austria, The Netherlands) and management bodies, high-ranking positions in public administration and the civil service, high courts (e.g. the Constitutional Court in Belgium), university boards (for instance, in Austria, Belgium), etcetera.

The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in the corporate sector is awfully disappointing. The most effective strategy is without doubt the legislative way to introduce measures, as kicked off by Norway in 2003. Since then, several EU Member States followed suit : Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, among others. Those measures mainly target women's presence in the board room of listed companies and in state owned or controlled companies and agencies.

In my country, Belgium, the results of this policy tool are already visible and encouraging. Thanks to the Law of 2011 aimed at increasing the number of female directors on the Boards of Directors of listed companies, their number in the top 20 listed companies increased from 11% in 2011 to nearly 20% in 2013, according to our Federal Institute for the Equality of Women and Men (IGVM/IEFH).

I do hope the newly elected European Parliament will bring strong and broad support to the Proposal for a Directive of the European Commission on improving the gender balance among non-executive directors of companies listed on stock exchanges and related measures, which has encountered opposition from several Member States in the Council (ref. COM(2012)614 final).

This Directive bears the potential to bring the European Union at the forefront of having legislation in place that effectively uses a fast track to ensure women's participation in economic decision making.

### **4. Recommendation for Gender quotas as a necessary policy tool**

Achieving gender parity is crucial for democracy. But how can we make more rapid progress?

- Looking back to Beijing 95, we find that legislative gender quotas for elections have proved to be the most effective measure to improve the political representation of women.
- More recently, and with increasing success, compulsory structural measures are being taken to promote the participation of women in decision-making in other sectors: social, economic, educational, both in the public and private sector.

- Hence, we can state that it is necessary to use legal structural measures, such as gender quotas, as a lever to speed up the achievement of equal participation of women and men in decision-making in all areas of society.
- However, an effective and fair application of gender quotas requires that they are well-designed: with clear rules, careful implementation adapted to the areas and sectors in which they are applied, meticulous follow-up and assessment, the exchange of best practices and, last but not least, effective sanctions and social involvement.
- But we know that these structural measures are not enough but need to be complemented with support programmes for women, such as training and mentor programmes, role models, flexible and non-stereotyped career planning, etcetera.

Finally I want to stress the need for a comprehensive strategy:

- We must have a clear picture of the state of play and have precise gender disaggregated statistics.
- We must continue to provide information, to educate and campaign to change mentalities in order to combat stereotypes
- We must address all actors, and call upon them to take their responsibilities: political parties, social partners, women movement, ...
- We need to continue to empower women and give them the necessary tools to reach decision-making positions.
- We have to adopt structural measures, such as gender quotas to speed up change and create a more just and equal society.

Thank you for your attention.