

WOMEN MOVE EUROPEAN POLITICS!

Conference Proceedings

15.03.2019

9.00-13.00

Europe House, Berlin

Summary

The elections to the European Parliament in May 2019 will be crucial not only for the future of Europe, but will have an impact on women's rights, too. Since the creation of the European Union (EU), gender equality improved greatly on account of the EU's commitment to gender equality policies. However, such progress, more than ever, is uneven and fragile, linked to the future of the EU and democracy. Gender Five Plus (G5+), the first European feminist think tank based in Brussels, has been working to draw the attention of European citizens and political stakeholders to the importance of the upcoming elections and what this may mean for women's rights. The conference "Women Move European Politics!" was one in a series of conferences that G5+ organised in different EU member states (Greece, Hungary, France, Cyprus, Germany and Belgium). The conference "Women Move European Politics!" was organised by G5+ in cooperation with the Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB)¹, the European Movement of Germany, the German Lawyers' Association and with the support and funding of the Berlin Senate. The Liaison Office of the European Parliament's in Berlin provided the infrastructure as well as the interpretation.

The objectives of the conference were to discuss how and what needs to be done to achieve real gender equality in Europe and what role the European elections play in this.

The conference started with some welcoming words by Laila Wold, representative of the European Parliament Information Office for Germany, and Agnes Hubert, President of G5+, and a keynote speech by Gabrielle Bischoff, German SPD candidate to the next European Parliament and until recently President of the Worker's Group of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC).

The first panel started with an introductory speech by Joanna Maycock, European Women's Lobby's (EWL) Secretary General, to frame the subsequent discussion between Maria Noichl, Member of the European Parliament, Dr. Gabriele Kämper, Head of the Equal Opportunities Office in the Administration of the Berlin Senate and

¹ German Federation of Trade Unions.

Brigitte Triems, President of the Democratic Women's League, about what "Europe does for women". The second panel benefitted from an introductory input by Alazne Irigoien, researcher and author of the G5+ study "[European Parliament's elections 2019: towards parity democracy in Europe](#)", which reconsidered the concept of parity democracy in the current EU political context and provided a list of recommendations to foster gender balance and gender policies in the EU.

The lively panel discussion, which followed sparked comments from Franziska Brantner, Member of the Bundestag and European Spokesperson for The Greens, Dr. Christine Rabe, representative of the Landesfrauenrat Berlin, Dr. Adriana Lettrari, member of European Movement Germany (EBD), winner of the European Women in Germany and Fürstenberg Institute, and Margarete Hofmann, Vice President djb a., djb Commission of International and European Law and Vice President European Women Lawyers Association (EWLA), and focused on the question of "What women want from Europe?". Barbara Helfferich and Joanna Tachmintzis of G5+ moderated the panels.

While all the speakers argued for the need to vote in the European elections for candidates that are committed to gender equality, and especially for women candidates given the persistent under-representation of women in the Parliament, in politics and in decision-making positions in general, they also had to answer some critical and incisive questions from the audience, which provided for a lively debate.

Many of the speakers noted the concrete threats coming from the far right and its anti-democratic regimes who argue against a supposed "gender ideology" and for "traditional family" policies. Others also remarked the lack of commitment to advance gender equality in some of the previous governments, which were not of far-right ideology. Some of the speakers provided a European perspective of the issue while some focused on the relations of the EU and local and national institutions and politics. They all agreed that there is no future for Europe without the active and equal participation of women, and that women need to build and shape the European Union together with men.

Speaker's contributions

Laila Wold, representing the Europe House and the European Parliament Information Office for Germany, welcomed all the participants. She mentioned that the principle of gender equality was established in the Lisbon Treaty and that gender equality was a core value of the EU. However, she regretted the current under-representation of women in the European Parliament. She explained the volunteer-based and cross-member states European Parliament's campaign: [#ThisTime I'mVoting](#) and encouraged participants to join it by motivating other people to go vote.

Agnes Hubert, President of G5+, explained what G5+ was and why the European Parliament's elections were of special interest to the organisation. As populist and far-right political parties have met with increased support during the last years, not only in the East of Europe but also in the West, G5+ is concerned about the impact in the actual emancipation of women in Europe. She warned about the possibility of these political parties being consolidated as the third force within the European Parliament, after the elections in May. She explained that such a position would give them a defining role in some EU negotiations and parliament resolutions to the detriment of women's rights. The reason why G5+ has organised a series of conferences in different EU member states (Greece, Hungary, France, Germany, Cyprus, Belgium) is both to raise awareness on the role of the European parliament in furthering EU gender equality policies but also to listen to women in the Member states.

Gabrielle Bischoff, German SPD candidate to the next European Parliament and until recently President of the Worker's Group of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), was the keynote. She called for a new wave of cooperation among women and people committed to gender equality in the EU, echoing the past suffragist's movement, which was a successful and cross-national collective experience. She stated that gender equality is not just the "cherry on the cake", something that we work on when in good times; but on the contrary, it should always be fought for. She said that the EU should see equality as an issue connected to the well-being of its people and therefore, take responsibility for it. She called for a mobilization of the feminist, pro-gender equality and pro-democracy electorate. She said that this mobilisation is needed to enable the EU's "renaissance". She demanded the EU reinforced by taking women's rights seriously and that Europe is not possible without women. She encouraged people to vote and to motivate others to vote in the upcoming elections to the European Parliament.

Joanna Maycock, Secretary General of the European Women's Lobby (EWL), opened the first Panel discussion "What does Europe offer women?" by providing an input speech. She talked about the long-standing [50/50 EWL](#) campaign for parity in the European Parliament, which is also a campaign to push for a gender balance in the leadership positions of all the EU institutions. She mentioned the progress on gender equality during the six decades of EU action, but explained how for a decade now, gender equality in Europe has stagnated. All too often, she said, initiatives by the European Commission and Parliament for fostering gender equality have been blocked in the Council of Ministers, that is by the EU Member States. She was concerned about the shift in the narrative as well as strategy by the far-right populists: no longer calling for a break-up of the EU but seeking to shape the future of Europe in their image. She explained the necessity to bring gender equality back into the core of European policies, most importantly at a time when the future of Europe is being discussed. She

asserted that women must be at the heart of the Future of Europe debate and that there is no Future of Europe without Women.

Maria Noichl, Member of the European Parliament, talked about her work in the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality of the European Parliament. She explained how the work of the committee is important to try to integrate the gender perspective in EU policy-making and legislation. As a cross-sectional body, the Committee provides its opinions on issues such as international trade agreements, women in the rural areas, digitalization, etc. However, she criticized the stagnation and lack of strong commitment to gender equality of the whole European Parliament and the European Commission. While there have been some great initiatives such as the [#MeTooEP](#), a lot needs yet to be done. Indeed, she noted that there is a backlash on gender equality on a daily basis. She also remarked that there has been a change in the political style at the European Parliament and in EU politics in general. The political style is now much more aggressive, confrontational, more “masculine” and ego-dominated, something that is of great concern. Maria underlined the importance of building a partnership-based political style. She also encouraged people to vote for feminist and gender equality-defender candidates.

Dr. Gabriele Kämper, Head of the Equal Opportunities Office in the Administration of the Berlin Senate, provided input from the local level. She noted how important the EU is for municipalities like Berlin. Gabriele explained that the European Social Fund, in particular, is key to developing several programmes at the local level: for example, the Berlin Women’s Computer Centre, which offers IT courses to women of the city. She explained how the EU had also helped the city on implementing the principle of gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting. EU legislation on violence against women was also relevant providing a firm legal basis to act upon. She demonstrated how and why the city of Berlin has benefited from the EU.

Brigitte Triems, President of the Democratic Women’s League, focused on the threat of the far-right movement in Europe. She expressed great worries about current anti-equality political agenda and warned that women’s rights should never be taken for granted. Brigitte explained how the far right was getting organised (with the support of Steve Bannon) and no longer wants to dissolve the EU but to reform it to shape it in its own terms. She also provided some prognoses about the increased support of far-right political parties everywhere in Europe: France, Spain, Poland, Italy, and others and noted that it is not a “trend” but something that has been developing over the last decades. She insisted on the importance of informing the citizens about how bad the situation is, as the support for these parties means a backlash on women’s rights. She encouraged people to go to vote for a non-far-right political party committed to gender equality and women's rights.

Questions and comments of the audience

People from the audience showed concern about the backlash on abortion rights. They also noted the instrumentalization of women that some far-right political parties and religious groups do to foster their anti-immigration agenda with the argument of wanting to protect women from migrant men. The issue of the rights of migrant women was also raised. For example, girls with headscarves find themselves attacked, both as women and muslims.

Alazne Irigoien, researcher on gender equality, opened the second panel discussion “What do women expect from Europe?” by providing an input speech. She presented the report she authored with G5+ on the European Parliament’s elections in 2019 and parity democracy. She focused on the need to build a system of parity democracy in Europe, especially in the current political European context. She provided some input on how we understand democracy and why gender equality should be a prerequisite, rather than a mere consequence of the established democracies. Given that the EU has declared gender equality as an official objective, the EU has not only the legitimate right to fight for it, but it has the responsibility to do so. She argued that the EU needs to put gender equality as the first political priority on the agenda and develop strong gender policies with accountability. In the current European political context and upcoming elections to the European Parliament, there is a risk that the number of women MEPs and women in other EU decision-making positions will fall, as well as to move backwards in the protection of women’s rights within the EU. The rise of the far right and their anti-equality and anti-democratic positions spell these as negative consequences for gender equality and women’s representation.

Franziska Brantner, Member of the Bundestag and European Spokesperson for The Greens, also provided her insights. She noted that European surveys show that women in Europe are very concerned about equal pay. Unfortunately, with the rise of the far-right, she postulated that there was a risk that the European Commission will not be doing much to promote equality issues for the next 5 years. She referred to two major sexist attacks against women in the current context: the first one is the “mother policy” that some governments, such as the Hungarian, have undertaken; and the second one is the double burden many women face, as they need to work both at home and in the labour market. Franziska also remarked the far-right’s discourse, which is based on a “win or lose” logic. The other parties and democratic forces should not take up this kind of discourse when talking about Europe, but on the contrary, should focus on the general improvements that Europe has brought since the establishment of the Union.

Dr. Christine Rabe, representative of the Landesfrauenrat Berlin, gave both a European and local perspective. She said that gender equality, democracy, freedom

and the rule of law are the EU's community values and as such, how they are part of the political identity of the EU. She said that women were expecting more actions on equality issues from the EU. Notably, gender equality in all offices and for all mandates at all decision-making levels in the EU, consistent gender mainstreaming, gender budgeting, an equal pay law and special guidelines on issues such as violence against women, women in leadership, compatibility rules... She explained some of the different activities of the Berlin campaign for the May 26 elections and encouraged people to vote for parties that have a gender equality agenda.

Dr. Adriana Lettrari, European Movement Germany (EBD), winner of the European Women in Germany and Fürstenberg Institute, focused on the need to have role models that work for Europe. She emphasised the relevance of seeing women in action, women that take up leadership roles and develop projects, actions. She noted that gender equality needs many allies and that gender equality measures should be supported by many in order to be correctly implemented. She regretted that still today, gender equality remains a journey and that much more is still needed. In her view, inspiring agents can contribute a lot to advancing the gender equality agenda.

Margarete Hofmann, Vice President djb a.D., djb Commission of International and European Law, Vice President European Women Lawyers Association (EWLA), referred to the importance of EU legislation and EU judicial bodies, such as the European Court of Justice, which has fostered gender equality across Europe in many of its rulings. She remarked the great contributions that the European Parliament and the European Commission have made in adopting legislation that supports gender equality, such as the recently agreed work-life balance directive. However, she regretted that such initiatives are often blocked by Member States and that women's rights are facing a backlash in some Member States. She gave visibility to the work of women in the peace-building and human rights domains and stated that the EU should develop a more feminist foreign policy. She was of the view that the EU should push legislation and work on different gender equality issues, especially on the equal participation of women and men, equal pay and the pension gap, digitalization, and others.

Questions and comments of the audience

Some people in the audience wondered about the measures that could be taken to advance parity democracy. Others commented on the recent launch of the public consultation of the European Commission, where citizens are asked for their opinion on the future of gender equality as a contribution to the next strategy. Other people showed concern about the low engagement and participation of women in political parties.

Key conclusions and recommendations:

Based on the recommendations of G5+'s aforementioned study and the contributions of the speakers and the audience, the following key conclusions and recommendations can be drawn:

Parity democracy:

- Against the persistent under-representation of women MEPs, adopt measures to ensure gender balance and parity in the European Parliament (i.e. legislation, quotas, rules and commitments by political parties). Ensure that the strong demands for parity democracy in the European Parliament also concern the appointments of other high-level positions of the EU institutions (presidents of the Commission and of the Council as well as high representative and governor of the ECB) and aim to achieve gender balance in the whole EU decision-making, including management and senior positions in the EU and Member states administrations. In the same line, spread the strategic benefits of increasing the number of women in political decision making so that other actors engage in promoting a system of parity democracy.

Gender equality policies:

- Bring gender equality back into the core of EU policies. Implement a holistic and robust EU gender policy, which addresses gender stereotypes, education, violence against women, horizontal and vertical segregation in the labour market, the valuing and sharing of caring activities and other issues, in addition to parity democracy. In particular, upgrade the current *Strategic Engagement on Gender Equality* and adopt a binding and accountable instrument to advance gender equality.
- Re-establish a specific gender budget line and more dedicated institutional bodies in the European Commission: for example, a commissioner for Gender equality, a group of commissioners to overview mainstreaming. Create binding instruments and allow human and financial resources to mainstream gender equality into all EU policies, including budget (gender budgeting) and economic policies.

Gender equality legislation:

- Adopt EU legislation on different gender equality issues, especially on the equal participation of women and men, the pension gap, digitalization, equal pay, migrant women and women from diverse ethnic and religious minorities, and others, and assure accountability.

EU values:

- The current rise of the far-right can jeopardize women's rights and the advancement of gender equality in Europe. Challenge and speak out against agents promoting illiberal anti-democratic, and antifeminist values and actions within the EU to safeguard the EU's shared values, foundational principles and democracy. Promote partnership-based EU politics and respectful discourses.

Political participation:

- Women's turnout in the elections has so far been lower than that of men. To increase it, it is important to show women role models and inform women about the benefits of the EU and how the EU has helped women's rights, and encourage them to vote. Also, inform about the benefits of the EU's funding for municipalities. In general, encourage EU citizens to vote for democratic political parties and candidates that are committed to gender equality. Mobilize the feminist, pro-gender equality and pro-democracy electorate for the upcoming EU elections.
- Public consultations are a good starting point for a better and more participatory EU democracy, keep developing and improving such mechanisms to take into account citizen's needs, especially those of women and minorities, which are usually not sufficiently considered.