

100 Years of Women's Full Political Rights in Finland¹

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We are celebrating the 100th anniversary of women's full political rights in Finland. Finland's thoroughgoing parliamentary reforms gave all adult men and women not only universal and equal suffrage, but also the full right to stand for elective office. In one sentence, Finnish women got the right to vote for a woman.

Finland was then the first country where women could fully exercise their voting rights and eligibility to stand for elective office. Today, in Finland we have a female President, and the proportion of women members of parliament is 38%. Women account for 44% of the ministers in the present Government. The percentage of women in elected bodies has been slowly increasing.

A hundred years ago women were demanding suffrage, an 8-hour working day, equal pay and the closure of brothels. Some of these demands are still or once again on the agenda. They are not easy questions but now the government has committed itself to responding to them.

The Finnish welfare state is to a great extent the result of women's work, expertise and innovations. The welfare state is, in my opinion, the reason behind the high fertility rate and women's employment numbers staying high in today's Finland. The politics that the

women have envisioned and driven for have brought good results.

Women's participation in political decision-making has effects on men's lives as well as women's. Some of these are the issues that women politicians have traditionally been concerned with; namely, education, social welfare and family policy. Parental leave systems and also paternal leave are results of these policies.

The quotas and the principle of equitable representation that we have in use in government committees, advisory boards, working groups and in municipal bodies have brought not only female expertise in the male-dominated areas of society but also given a chance for a male-view in the female-dominated groups.

Women have continued to have an active role in Finnish society. Women have been and still are very active in the trade union movement. Our women voters are socially aware. Now we are in a situation where 38% of our MPs are women. We do not have quotas in our elections but our political parties have women's organizations that have been active and achieved women candidates for elections. The oldest of these women's political organizations are also 100 years old. These political women's organizations have really empowered women throughout this time and are still doing so.

1. Country holding the Presidency of the EU in the second semester of 2006.

We still need more women to be involved in our political decision-making. The next aim we have to keep in mind is to increase the number of women in economic decision-making. We have to concentrate not only on the amount of women but also on gender expertise and the ability to mainstream gender perspective into decision-making at all levels and at all stages.

As the World Economic Forum has stated, economic growth does benefit and prosper in a society where gender equality is taken into account. I believe that gender equality, the welfare state and economic growth all belong together and they all support each other and also need each other. It is not easy to have one without the others.

I have invited the EU Gender Equality Ministers to Helsinki for an informal meeting in October. The main theme of the informal meeting is "Women in Power and Decision-making". Ministers are invited to discuss, for example, what mechanisms are available to raise the presence of women in top-level management positions.

It is important to encourage female participation in both political and economic decision-making. I think that we can all agree that gender equality and societal equality are prerequisites for economic growth. Despite this, only 10-11% of members of the highest decision-making bodies in the European level Top 50 companies are women (EC database on women and men in decision-making). So, to pursue the Lisbon Strategy objectives and to improve Europe's competitiveness it is crucial that women are represented in decision-making bodies as well as in economic life.

Euromed Women's Conference

Globally we started talking about women's rights as human rights in 1995 in Beijing. If women are not a part of the decision-making



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process these rights are not going to be achieved. Moreover, the most difficult social, economic and political problems are not going to be solved in our world if women all around don't have full possibilities to participate in and influence decision-making.

Finland is going to preside the Euromed Women's Conference, which will be organised in November in Turkey. The main themes of the Conference are 1) Women's rights as a guarantee of human rights; 2) Women's socio-economic participation; 3) Gender stereotypes in education, media and culture.

Men and Gender Equality

During the Finnish EU Presidency, we will also discuss how gender equality policy improves

the status of both women and men. For example, we should remember that legislation prohibiting gender discrimination is aimed at protecting men just as well as women. This seems to be quite often forgotten in discussions for enhancing gender equality. However, at this point, I would like to stress that “men and gender equality” should not be viewed as competing with the mainstream of gender equality policy, which aims at improving the status of women; the former should be fully integrated into the latter. This will support and strengthen gender equality policy as a whole and its principal goal, improving the status of women.

The theme of “men and gender equality” will be discussed in more detail at the invited conference “Men & Gender Equality – Towards Progressive Policies”, jointly organized by Finland and the EU Commission for October 2006. This conference will address the tensions and challenges inherent in the relationship between men and gender equality and outline strategic guidelines through which men can be better integrated into gender equality policy. The main focus of the conference will be on policy: what has been done and

what should be done regarding men and gender equality.

The increasing participation of men in family life and active support for fatherhood may have a positive impact on the birth rate

The links between the men and gender equality theme and EU-level processes are apparent for instance in the employment goals of the Lisbon Strategy and in demographic change. Men’s more active participation in family life makes it easier for women to reconcile professional and private life and, therefore, to participate in working life on a more equal basis. Comparisons between EU Member States show that women going to work is not detrimental to the birth rate, as long as necessary services such as day care are provided. Indeed, the increasing participation of men in family life and active support for fatherhood may have a positive impact on the birth rate. I believe that we in Finland, in the European Union and in the Mediterranean still have a lot to do. Women’s empowerment is not complete, it still needs our attention.