Balances participation of women and men in the decision-making process (Recommendation 96 /694/EC). Report

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PURPOSE: To report on the implementation of the Council's 96/694 recommendation on the balanced participation of women and men in the decision-making process. CONTENT: With the aim of increasing the number of women in the decison-making process, and thereby altering the content of decisions, the Council adopted the Recommendation on the balanced participation of women and men in the decision-making process on 2 December 1996. The Recommendation calls on the Commission to submit a report on its implementation to the EP and the EcoSoc, for the first time three years after adoption. The overall objective of the Recommendation was to encourage the Member states to promote a more balanced participation of women and men in the decision-making process, and to adopt specific measures to achieve this goal. Against this background, the report reveals that in spite of a host of different measures adopted by member states, the under representation of women in governments and Parliaments, and committees preparing decisions as well as in higher levels of hte labour market has not changed considerably. The average percentage of women in government of all the Member states and EEA countries is 24.5% and 22.5% in the national parliaments, varying from 6.3% in Greece to 43.6% in Sweden. The number of women in committees preparing decisions is even lower. Even in those countries (Belgium and Germany) where data on the composition of committees is collected systematically and where laws provide for an equal or a minimum of a one third participation of the underrepresented sex in decision-making bodies, the percentage of women is only 18.68% and 12.2% respectively. A considerable number of committees do not have even one woman (28.7% in Germany). Whereas the Scandinavian countries and the United Kingdom target a 50% participation, most countries consider a participation rate of at least 30% to constitute the critical mass above which women or men can exercise any real influence. Substantive progress in women's participation has been shown in countries with longstanding traditions of equal opportunities policies such as Sweden and Finland with a participation of 52.6% and 44.4% of women in the governments respectively. 68% of Finnish public sector committees have a female participation of 44%. In general, what is needed to promote gender balance is a policy mix including- as the msot important factor- long term political commitment, sound statistics, regular monitoring, appropriate structures- depending on the culture of the Member states- anchored in legislation and the provision of financial resources. There is growing awareness for the need to recruit and promote qualified women in most European institutions and many of them have adopted positive action policies to redress the staff balance. Less has been done however, on the gender balance in committees. While legislative measures have some impact on the public sector, the private sector needs particular attention and posssibly a different approach. Austria, Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Finalnd and the United Kingdom are promoting projects aimed at making employees aware of the economic benefits of employing women. More progress also needs to be made regarding women in senior positions in the civil service and publicsector bodies. The report has revealed a certain lack of comparable data submitted to the Commission which has not facilitated the systematic evaluation of developments. Discussion should be encouraged in the Council with view to improving the collection of data and an eventual decision on new action.