Balanced participation of women and men in decision-making process (Council Recommendation 96/694)

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PURPOSE : to establish a report on the implementation of Council Recommendation 96/694 on the balanced participation of women and men in the decision-making process. CONTENT : in order to redress the under-representation of women, which amounts to a democratic deficit in addition to being an under utilisation of human resources, the Council on 2 December 1996 adopted a Recommendation on the balanced participation of women and men in the decision-making processes through: - an integrated strategy to promote a balanced participation of women and men; - including awareness raising campaigns; - the collection of data; - encouraging examples of good practice and; - the promotion of a gender balance at all levels of governmental bodies and committees. The Recommendation calls on the Commission to report on its implementation to the European Parliament, the Council and the Economic and Social Committee, for the first time three years after the adoption. The present report fulfils this obligation. It reveals that in spite of a host of different measures adopted by Member States the under representation of women in governments and Parliaments, and committee preparing decisions as well as in the higher levels of the labour market has not changed considerably. The average percentage of women in the Governments of all 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. Efforts and results vary considerably in the Member States of the European Union and the European institutions. As the Recommendation does not define the term "balanced participation" Member States have a choice which percentage of women in decision-making bodies they consider as being balanced. Whereas the Scandinavian countries and the United Kingdom target a 50% participation, most countries consider a participation rate of at least 30% to consitute 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 the Finnish public sector committees have a female participation of 44%. The balanced participation of women and men in decision-making is increasingly recognised as a requirement for democracy, as well as having a positive outcome for society, in that different ideas and values will be fed into the decision-making processes, leading to results which take into accountthe interests and needs of the whole population. What is needed to promote gender balance is a policy mix including - as the most 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 a 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 on the gender balance in committees. While legislative measures have some impact on the public sector, the private sector needs particular attention and possibly a different approach. Austria, Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Finland and the UK are promoting projects aimed at making employers 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 public sector bodies. Finally, the report has revealed a certain lack of comparable data submitted to the Commission which has not facilitated the systematic evaluation of development. It should be noted that discussions should be encouraged in the Council with a view to improving the collection of data and an eventual decision on new action.