



“Lobbying for Quotas: The Experience of the CEE Network for Gender Issues”

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“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”
United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 (Article 1)

The Historical and International Perspective

It is all in the balance of power. Human relations are not a given. Relationships between men and women are a work in progress. For there to be progress, a partnership must be established that is based on equality.

In order to understand progress, or the lack thereof, with regard to gender equality, one needs to reflect on lessons learnt. The struggle for equality—that is, human rights—gained momentum after the French Revolution. It is also the product of the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century. The establishment of trade unions gave rise to the emergence of the women’s movement. Women activists demanded the right to vote, the right to work and the same working conditions as men, as well as the abolition of slavery, child labour and discrimination. These are the issues that the women’s movement brought to the attention of the International Labour Organization (ILO), the League of Nations and the United Nations (UN) itself.

Women like Klara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg not only led the workers’ movement but they introduced it to the notion of equality between the sexes. They ‘mainstreamed’ it, as one would say today. The CEE Network for Gender Issues, established in 1993, draws on this heritage.

The founding of the League of Nations in 1919 marked the beginning of organized and institutionalized inter-governmental collaboration to achieve supra-national goals (peace and security). Women's organizations got involved not only to promote peace following the end of the First World War, but also because they believed that the advancement of women could not be achieved at the national level without dedicated government policies and democracy. The creation of international women's networks was seen as a prerequisite for the achievement of these goals.

Representatives of women's organizations present at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, where the League of Nations and the ILO were established, made concrete proposals to the Covenant of the League of Nations. As a result, the latter declared that, inter alia, governments should make sure that all positions within the League of Nations and its Secretariat are open to men and women on an equal basis. They stopped short of calling for positive action, or the introduction of a quota. In 1937 the League of Nations created a Committee of Experts on the Legal Status of Women—which, in a way, was the precursor of what was to become the UN Commission on the Status of Women—which undertook to follow up on this agenda. Article 8 of the UN Charter states: 'The UN shall place no restrictions on the eligibility of men and women to participate in any capacity and under conditions of equality in its principal and subsidiary organs'. This was, indeed, very little progress since the creation of the League of Nations.

Today, 85 years since the establishment of the League of Nations and almost 60 years since the creation of the UN, the overall rate of participation of women in the UN Secretariat, and in many agencies and programmes, does not exceed 40 percent—and is much lower for senior posts. The first woman to become Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations was Helvi Sipilä of Finland, in 1972. Sipilä brought about a significant change in political activism when she lobbied governments to include women in their delegations. As a consequence a critical mass of women delegates began to emerge.

The increase in women staff members at the UN is the result of international conferences on women's issues and a heightened sense of awareness following the Fourth International Women's Conference in Beijing, China, in September 1995. Still, progress is tremendously slow, and there may be a new backlash looming as a result of adverse world developments. New momentum is required to reinvigorate the struggle for gender equality; the ten-year anniversary of the Beijing conference may provide an opportunity to push the agenda forward. International conventions, treaties and conferences have been instrumental in putting pressure on actors at the international and national levels.

Central and Eastern Europe: Backlash in the 1990s

In Central and Eastern Europe, as long ago as the mid-twentieth century—that is, during the period of communist rule—equal rights and status were guaranteed for all. These rights were enshrined in national Constitutions. Legal provisions concerning equality were introduced and focussed on different social, economic and public sectors. Officially, there was no discrimination. Hidden forms of discrimination, however, thrived.

The communist regimes emphasized, in particular, social and economic rights, such as equality with respect to employment opportunities and education. In the political sphere, a quota for women, on average, 30 percent, was introduced. But quotas and

equal rights and opportunities also require equal outcomes and appropriate conditions for implementation. Many women members of political leaderships during the communist era were seen by other women as 'token women', subservient in a male-dominated political climate and inadequately militant on the 'women's issue'. In many respects, this has led to misconceptions about the quota in Central and Eastern Europe. Initially the CEE Network had to dispel these false impressions when pressing for the introduction of the quota.

What really hindered the meaningful participation of women in political life, and, to some extent, their public activism, though, were cultural, psychological inhibitions with deep connections to patriarchal society. Even if goodwill did exist among men in the political leaderships, their perceptions of women had changed very little: women were seen as care-providers and home-makers. 'They are our flowers', according to a prominent Central European politician (addressing an assembly of the CEE Network). At a meeting in Belarus, an academic said: 'they are our mothers and they carry with them the burden of reproducing our society, they are the bastion of a nation'.

The cause, the issues and how it started

Aware of the key issues confronting Central and Eastern European women in the 1990s, a number of women and men,¹ political activists in the region, set up the CEE Network for Gender Issues. It sprung from the realization that, in a male-dominated society, women, who were professionally educated and had gained recognition, were going to be the losers in the transition and that the key gains made in the communist era, particularly in the social and economic spheres, were going to be eradicated.

The liberal market-economy model was going to affect sectors where women were most active and the transition was going to mean job losses and, with them, a cut in benefits. In this region, gender inequalities are also staunchly embedded in the private sphere of patriarchal dominance and in the social sphere of patriarchal culture as reflected in a general lack of access to politics, lower pay for equal work, and women's responsibility for household management and reproductive labour. Unless women were granted a voice in the transition process it was going to be difficult to repair the damage later. The rise of nationalist and conservative ideologies, often dominated by the church, risked pushing women back to the three K's: küche, kinder and kirche (kitchen, children, church).

The activists who set up the CEE Network realized that it was vital to get women into the public arena and to create the conditions that would allow them to participate in political life. This was a daunting task at the beginning of the 1990s, a period characterized, for example, by disorientation, disillusion, unemployment and social security cuts. While feminist organizations lobbied for women's individual rights they did not seek to influence broader societal dialogue on the status of women. Equally, confronted with hardships related to the transition, women returned to the home and assumed their traditional roles, trying to cope with the new challenges and with little time for private undertakings. They withdrew from political life. The recourse was to break the mould and seek to change the political discourse. What better than through political parties.

Table 1: Percentage Of Women In Parliament And In Government In Particular Countries Of Central And Eastern Europe

Country	Year right to vote granted to women	Highest % of women members of parliament (MPs), 1974–1985	% women MPs, 1990	% women MPs, 1992–1994	% women MPs, 1996–1998	% women MPs, 2001	% women ministers, 2001
Albania	1920	33.2 (1974)	3.6	5.7	7.1	6.5	16.7
Bulgaria	1944	21.8 (1981)	12.9	13.3	10.8	28.0	-
Romania	1946	34.4 (1985)	3.6	4.1	7.3	11.6	20.0
Macedonia	1945	-	-	-	4.0	6.67	10.4
Kosovo	1945	-	-	-	-	30.0	-
Serbia	1945	-	3.0	-	5.0	12.0	-
Montenegro	1945	-	-	-	3.0	10.0	0
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1945	23 (1982)	5.0	3.0	26.0	18.0	-
Croatia	1945	17 (1982)	4.4	5.8	7.8	20.5	8.33
Slovenia	1943–1946	26.0 (1982)	11.0	14.0	7.8	13.3	20.0
Hungary	1958	30.1 (1980)	7.3	11.4	8.3	8.55	6.25
Average		26.5	6.35	8.19	8.7	15.0	13.6

The chance arose in 1993 with the formation of the European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity—an alliance of socialist and social-democratic-oriented European foundations close to the Party of European Socialists (PES). As a result, the CEE Network chose not to become an independent NGO, but, rather, decided to work within the European Forum and to support gender mainstreaming in its activities. It also concentrated on achieving change within individual parties through awareness-raising, discussions on positive measures and initiatives to strengthen the capacity of women’s political party groups and individual women members of party leaderships. To ensure cross-border fertilization and support through joint activities, the CEE Network was created to work across the CEE region.

The European Forum provided the CEE Network with a political platform, an outreach capability and the means to influence developments at the highest political level, with adequate backing from a strong European caucus. The CEE Network decided to be extremely focussed in terms of its topics of interest and its constituency, concentrating on: women in politics and political leaderships; women members of minorities (as an issue concerning democracy and equality); reproductive rights (as issues associated with equality and the human rights of women); the social and economic transition and its impact on women’s rights; and EU accession and gender equality.

The CEE Network set out the following ambitious agenda:

- 50 percent power-sharing, via the **quota**;
- a **change in political values**—peace and respect for all human rights;
- a **change in political priorities**—job creation, care for victims of war and violence, care for children and the elderly and sustainable development;

- a **change in the political culture and methods of political work**—consensus-building, decentralization and power-sharing, inclusive and participatory democracy, and social justice and gender equality; and
- supportive national and regional institutions.

Research, advocacy and direct activism involving male and female members of party leaderships produced tangible results. The most striking are the quota system and the number of women in parliament and in the political leaderships of socialist and social-democratic parties.

The CEE Network identified its key successes in 2003:

1. More women in the political structures and on the electoral lists of socialist and social-democratic parties—except the Albanian Socialist Party.
2. Promotion of the quota principle—adopted by all parties, except the Albanian Socialist Party.
3. Identification of emerging issues—challenges to gender equality in the EU enlargement process as a result of a conservative backlash.
4. Greater support for women’s groups within socialist and social-democratic parties and allied NGOs in the region vis-à-vis political decision-making through “Women Can Do It I,II and III” training at the local level in all countries of the region. Women, members of socialist and social-democratic parties from 73 cities were included.
5. Identification of priorities and elements of joint activities for the implementation of the EU Gender Equality and Gender Equal Opportunity Policy in a broader European context—SP/SDP Manifesto on Gender Equality. For instance: equal political representation of women; separation of public schools and churches; feminization of poverty and women’s employment issues; abortion and prevention of reproductive health issues and violence against women. All workshops and conferences brought together women members of socialist and social-democratic parties from EU member states and candidate countries.
6. Media campaigns to achieve gender equality in the region and preparation for the 2004 EU elections.

Keys to Success

Success rested on the generation of political will to change power relations and to establish gender equality. To do this it was necessary to take a number of steps.

Political platforms and party constitutions

It was crucial to penetrate political decision-making structures in order to ensure that gender equality is embedded in party documents, as the basis for promoting it at the parliamentary level and at more general levels nationally. Equally, it was necessary to introduce measures and to campaign to make sure that women are included in appropriate numbers on electoral platforms and in electoral agreements. This was a step-by-step process—introduction of parity in political leaderships; empowerment of women’s organizations and individual women politicians; negotiations on establishing electoral platforms and lists; lobbying for the zip

system; and post-electoral rapid action to ensure that gender equality remains on the agenda, especially within parties that come to power.

Introduction of Quotas

'If quotas can be a useful means to make up for the lack of representation of a certain category, it is important to recall the fundamental conceptual difference with parity. Whereas quotas can be perceived as a "ceiling" used to protect the rights of a minority and ensure its participation in the decision-making ... Parity goes a step further. Parity concerns our societies as whole and not just women. It is also about more than just participation. It is about power sharing and participation on an equal basis (50/50) or from 40/60 to 60/40. In other words, Parity is the claim that men and women must be *equally* represented in decision-making positions whereas quotas are only a means to achieve fair representation'.
European Women's Lobby <http://www.womenlobby.org>

It was necessary to translate party declarations and commitments on gender equality into practice. This was done through lobbying for, and the introduction of, affirmative/positive action. The quota system served as a tool with which to put political will into practice and as an interim measure to foster equality, albeit formally. The understanding was that it would also target hidden discrimination, which more often than not is central to the exclusion of women from public life.

Today, the existence of the quota is a precondition for socialist and social-democratic parties to become members of the Socialist International (the worldwide organisation of social democratic, socialist and labour parties which currently brings together 166 political parties and organisations from all continents). This has helped significantly, since it has provided strong 'political' backing for the demand for parity. However, opposition to the quota had a gender dimension. While in general men were reluctant to relinquish their hold on power and to give up their privileged positions, some women claimed that the quota was 'humiliating', insisting that they should be elected on merit and underscoring the danger that 'token women' will neglect gender issues when elected.

The CEE Network advocated for the quota in order to achieve:

- parity in political leaderships at all levels;
- parity in political instruments, as a result of more women in leadership positions;
- parity with respect to candidate lists; and
- post-electoral parity (once the party comes to power) in the executive and legislative branches.

The success of the European Forum and the CEE Network is evidenced by the rise in women in politics, more women in political party structures, stronger women's party organizations, and functioning party quotas. The following are just a few examples.

- The Hungarian 'yellow scarf' movement campaigned tirelessly on behalf of women candidates and socialist and social-democratic ideals in the last 2003 elections, resulting in a woman being appointed speaker of parliament.

- A shadow cabinet was set up by social-democratic women in the Czech Republic after their party leaders left did not respect gender equality in the composition of the Cabinet.
- Women candidates captured over 20 percent of seats in parliament in the 2000 elections. A woman was also appointed minister of defence (Croatia).
- Serbian opposition leaders signed a quota for women in 2000. The agreement stated: 'We commit ourselves to do our best to put on our party lists for the forthcoming Republican elections in Serbia, on eligible places, a minimum of 30% of women candidates. We also promise that in the new Serbian Parliament we will support the change of electoral legislation containing active measures for gradual inclusion of the gender balance (parity) in the competition for all elected and appointed political offices and civil servants' posts in Serbia'. By 8 December 2000, 14 of Serbia's 18 democratic opposition parties had signed the agreement; five of them respected it. The proportion of elected women in the Serbian parliament increased from five to ten percent. Similar pre-electoral quota agreements were signed in Macedonia in 2000 and in Montenegro in 2001. Both had a similar effect.

Advocacy, capacity-building and tools

In 1995, the CEE Network entered into an agreement with the Norwegian Labour Party to translate its training manual entitled *Women Can Do It* into all Central and Eastern European languages and to train women's groups. Training focuses on building up the capacity of women to allow them to participate in public life. The CEE Network organized training courses for political parties and NGOs, producing immediate results.

The CEE Network was instrumental in the establishment of the OSCE Gender Task Force, which has produced second and third editions of *Women Can Do It* for Southeast Europe. The CEE Network still organizes training courses for women in the Baltic States and Central Europe.

Partnerships

The CEE Network established a broader constituency by reaching out to women in other political parties and to the NGOs. A concrete example at the sub-regional level is the aforementioned OSCE Gender Task Force. Nationally, partnerships have been forged with women leaders from different political parties and NGOs. A good example is the meeting with women from political parties, trade unions and NGOs that took place in Serbia/Vojvodina prior to the January 2004 elections to assess progress in getting women on to electoral lists and to formulate a joint strategy for the polls.

The support that the CEE Network received from men and women in the European Forum and the PES was invaluable, which in turn influenced party leaderships in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, with a level of collegiality being established. The CEE Network is a member of the Steering Committee of the European Forum and participates in the work of the Party of European Socialists' Women's Standing Committee. In this way it enjoys political leverage and can engage in outreach. Too many NGOs remain within a small circle, preaching to the converted. The CEE Network tries to work upstream and conveys key messages on gender equality to high level decision-makers.

Conclusion

Progress has been made since the collapse of Communism and women are assuming their rightful place in society and public life. This is due to a well designed and targeted political strategy, as well as to advocacy, capacity-building and the forming of partnerships. International instruments, especially those adopted by the EU and the Council of Europe, have been instrumental in moving the equality agenda forward. The next wave of work will involve pushing the agenda further and addressing the imbalances revealed in the table below. To achieve the 50/50 target may take another decade.

Endnotes

¹ The CEE Network has depended on the involvement of women and men like Lena Ag, Marta Szigeti Bonifert, Bo Toresson, Conny Fredriksson, Maria-Pia Di Masco, Sonja Lokar, Zita Gurmai, Svetlana Raulinaitiene, Alena Chudikova, Marianna Knothe, Anita Gradin, Herta Dobler-Gemlin, Marlène Haas, Vojko Venisnik, Laszlo Kovacz, Lena Hjelm-Vallin, Axel Queval, Lisl Kauer, Jan Mairnus-Wiersm, Lyssie Grüner, Pia Locatelli, Anna Karamanou. Daša Šašić Šilović has chaired the CEE Network since its establishment.