

25 Years of Action for Equality

European Conference of Local and Regional Elected Women Representatives

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Local and regional authorities have a crucial role in encouraging women's participation in public life

Speech by Britt-Marie Lövgren

(Rapporteur for equality issues of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe)

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends,

It is a special honour for me to address this session today as Rapporteur for equality issues of the Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, an elected assembly bringing together local and regional authorities from 47 countries, representing more than 200,000 territorial communities of Europe. It is a special honour because it is here, in Pisa, where twenty-five years ago local and regional women elected representatives of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, CEMR, held their first conference to promote women's participation in the decision-making and political life within our communities.

This first session gave impetus to what we call today "Action for Equality", in recognition of equal rights of every individual to take charge of their own lives and participate in the decision-making process at every level of government. Almost six years after this first conference of women elected representatives, in November 1988, the Council of Europe's executive body – the Committee of Ministers – adopted the Declaration of equality of women and men, which laid the foundation for action by the Council of Europe, including its Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

For its part, CEMR, which is a partner organisation for the Congress, has been pursuing its activities on equality issues, and I can only welcome CEMR's European Charter for Equality

between Women and Men in Local Life, officially presented in May 2006. The Congress of the Council of Europe gives its full support to this text.

Of course, the Declaration and the Charter are only a small part in the panoply of legal texts adopted over the past twenty-five years, and the situation today is different than it was back then. However, while the rates of women's participation in political life still vary greatly from one country to another, the overall proportion of female elected representatives in the regional institutions remains unsatisfactory.

At the same time, there is also growing awareness today that we cannot achieve true equality in our society without addressing the issue of gender equality. In this respect, the Congress has been calling in many of its legal texts for the removal of obstacles to women's participation in political life. The Congress has also been calling for raising awareness of the importance of gender mainstreaming in the media, and through education at all levels.

If we are to achieve a society based on equality, it is essential that local and regional governments take the gender dimension fully into account, in their policies and their practices. And in today's and tomorrow's world, the real equality of women and men is also key to our economic and social success - not just at European or national levels, but also in our regions, towns and local communities.

The Congress is involved in almost every field of activities of the Committee of Ministers' Steering Group for gender equality, including action against trafficking in human beings, combating violence against women, gender mainstreaming, and women in politics and decision-making. The Congress is participating in Council of Europe campaigns against domestic violence and against trafficking in human beings; in particular, it organized poster campaigns against domestic violence in local communities across Europe, and adopted a Declaration on action to combat human trafficking, available for signature online on the Congress website.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Council of Europe attaches enormous importance to gender-balanced representation in political life as in all spheres. Indeed, in its Recommendation Rec(2003)3 on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision-making, adopted in 2003, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers stated that the balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision making is a matter of the full enjoyment of human rights, of social justice and a necessary condition for the better functioning of a democratic society.



The recommendation points out that balanced participation in political and public decision making will lead to better and more efficient policy making through the redefinition of political priorities and the placing of new issues on the political agenda as well as to the improvement of quality of life for all. To this end, it states that the representation of either women or men in any decision-making body in political or public life should not fall below 40%.

However, in September 2005, the gender-based statistics on the implementation of this recommendation, which looked at governments, national and regional parliaments and local and regional elected representatives showed that we are unfortunately still far from achieving this goal.

Let me now outline some of the more specific work done by the Council of Europe Congress. As I have mentioned earlier, our Congress is also greatly concerned to ensure equitable representation of the sexes in local and regional public life. The Congress believes that the role of local and regional authorities is crucial in supporting local initiatives to encourage women's participation in politics and public life. Such experiences as twinning and partnerships between local and regional authorities of Europe can also help to bring women from different communities closer together, to enable them to share experiences of the electoral process and engage in an informal process of raising awareness of women's rights as citizens.

The Congress itself is taking steps to make sure that we practice what we preach. In its Resolution 170 on the verification of credentials of new members and new appointment procedures, adopted in 2004, the Congress requested that all national delegations include a minimum of 30% of women. This request was reaffirmed in Recommendation 162 in 2005, on the revision of the Charter of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. The recommendation calls for the "equitable representation of women and men on the statutory bodies of local and regional authorities in the member states, meaning that all delegations were obliged to include, by 2008, representations of both sexes with a minimum participation of at least 30% of the under-represented sex."

As well as including women's rights and equality in a large number of fields in a transversal way in its work – for example in such topics as employment, extreme poverty, integration of migrants and their growing feminisation – the Congress has also dealt with the topic directly. In its *Recommendation 68* on women's participation in political life in the regions of Europe, adopted in 1999, the Congress called for the removal of obstacles to women's participation in political life by amending national legislation as necessary, and for the recognition of the legitimacy of anti-



discriminatory practices and the introduction of positive measures to facilitate women's access to public and political office.

The Congress called on national authorities to facilitate, in co-ordination with regional authorities as appropriate, the introduction of measures liable to increase women's participation in regional institutions. Such measures could include:

alerting political parties to the possibility of fielding female candidates when administrative elections are held;

launching specific training courses for candidates to familiarise them with political techniques, and awareness raising campaigns to overcome women's fear of lacking sufficient skills and to motivate them to become actively engaged in political life;

establishing specific measures to enable candidates to reconcile family life with civil jobs and political duties;

or support for joint activities by political parties to increase the number of women actively engaged in politics.

In 2002, the Congress adopted Recommendation 111 and Resolution 134 on women's individual voting rights: a democratic requirement, in which it drew attention to the inappropriateness of family voting and stressed that such practices are unacceptable in a democracy. Two years later, in 2004, in Recommendation 148 and Resolution 176 on gender mainstreaming at local and regional level: a strategy to promote equality between women and men in cities and regions, the Congress called for awareness-raising and training among civil servants to enable them to implement and effectively monitor gender equality policies, and for awareness-raising of the importance of gender mainstreaming in the media and through education at all levels. It also called for support for the work done in this field by the CEMR.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I have mentioned earlier, recently we have also been involved in the Council of Europe action against trafficking in women and against domestic violence.

We believe that towns and regions are where the final stage of human trafficking is played out: it is at regional, but especially at local, level that victims of trafficking can more easily be identified and



helped and so local and regional authorities should be closely involved in all aspects of the fight against trafficking. It is therefore only natural that the Congress Committee on Social Cohesion gave its full backing to the new Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, which entered into force on 1 February this year. The Committee also wanted to add the local and regional dimension to this debate, and adopted, in 2005, *Recommendation 165 and Resolution 196 on the fight against trafficking in human beings and their sexual exploitation: the role of cities and regions*.

Given that the main areas of action for local and regional authorities appear to be in the social domain we identified three main areas of activity in our texts as being not only generally within the scope of public authorities' powers and competence but also the most effective at their level. These areas are: awareness-raising, education and specialised training, and, in particular, the protection, rehabilitation and reintegration of victims.

The Congress has also been active in the campaign against domestic violence. The campaign was publicised at local and regional level throughout Europe, Congress members were encouraged to launch debates on this issue in their national parliaments, and municipalities were asked to take on board the Council of Europe expert recommendations of the Task Force on training of municipal social workers, police officers, etc. The Congress will discuss a report on domestic violence at local and regional level at the end of this year.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The stated aim of the Council of Europe and its 47 member states is to achieve greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and promoting the ideals and principles which are their common heritage. It is clear that achieving effective equality between women and men is an integral part of these ideals and principles, and that equality between women and men is a fundamental dimension of the protection and promotion of human rights, and a strong indication of the quality of any democracy.

It is therefore essential that we continue to raise awareness and promote and encourage special measures to stimulate and support women's will to participate in political and public decision-making.

I would like to conclude by recalling the words of Kofi Annan, then Secretary General of the United Nations, who so rightly said: "Women's equality is not just a right – it is a prerequisite for development."



Thank you.

Relevant recommendations and resolutions:

Recommendation 68 (1999) on women's participation in political life in the regions of Europe

Resolution 85 (1999) on women's participation in political life in the regions of Europe

Recommendation 111 (2002) on women's individual voting rights: a democratic requirement

Resolution 134 (2002) on women's individual voting rights: a democratic requirement

Recommendation 148 (2004) on gender mainstreaming at local and regional level: a strategy to promote equality between women and men in cities and regions

Resolution 176 (2004) on gender mainstreaming at local and regional level: a strategy to promote equality between women and men in cities and regions

