

Politics and Gender Equality

Bratislava, 23 September 2005

There can be no full blown democracy without gender equality. In 2005 gender equality should be a fact of life, not a constant reminder of what we do not have.

But as we all are aware this is far from the case.

Gender Equality is not women's rights but basic human rights. For us, involved in politics, it becomes obvious that one of the ways to make society equal must be to involve more women in politics.

But this is not the whole story. There is also a growing awareness that basic knowledge about the issues of gender equality does not come automatically to every woman, just by being a woman. This is a political area, a political subject in its own right, just as knowledge of the fight against racism does not come automatically to all people victimized by it, or indeed knowledge on how to fight against terrorism does not come automatically to all victims of terrorism.

How to promote gender equality is a policy area in its own right.

At the same time every woman, as a woman, live in a society where men rule. Here the concept of **patriarchy** is useful. It refers to a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. It must be stressed that social structures, male power as socially constructed, not men as single individuals, are made responsible for this systematic oppression.

We these caveats it is true that we live in a society where men rule. In some parts of the world this rule is still legally sanctioned, but even in our part of the world where the situation has been modernized the male norm is ever present.

This male norm is often invisible, it is often perceived as the normal way to run things. But as liberals we have to confront this superficial feeling of normalcy and expose it for what it

truly is, a gender power structure where men typically are positioned above women in hierarchies of power.

This is not really news as such.

But we desperately need new political instruments to address the situation.

If we want to make a difference in political life we also have to be self-critical. What have we as liberals done to change things? What can we do better? Are we using a thorough analysis or are our political instruments in this field still in need of improvement?

For many years we have been stating the importance of gender equality, but we need to monitor what we have achieved in concrete terms.

There are two basic arguments for gender equality. The most usual one focuses on individual rights and equal opportunities.

The second one focuses on what society gains from promoting gender equality.

I will primarily explore this second line of thinking, since I believe it to be crucial for the topic for this congress, Growth and Prosperity.

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Let me repeat:

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In 25 years time Europe will lose 41 million people with the present level of immigration. This is truly dramatic

The statistics are not entirely new. For some years now demographical figures have pointed out a development that should be a signal of alarm to us all.

Of all the countries in the Council of Europe only Turkey and Albania reach a level above reproduction, 2,1 children per woman.

In these countries the population reproduces itself.

But in all other countries levels are below reproduction, and in some countries the levels are strikingly low. Of the Member States Italy, Slovenia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic are the three with the lowest birth rates.

But apart from Ireland none of the EU Member States are even close to reaching the figure of 2,1 children per woman.

What is the reason behind this? Is there cause for alarm? What can we do about it?

The reason behind the current demographic situation is of course complex. No simple explanations are available. Not in terms of geography, ethnic background or religion. It will be up to the scientific community to analyze this. But in the meantime we cannot just wait and not do anything.

If we really want to work together for a competitive Europe the issue of dramatically shrinking population is of course a major issue.

And there is reason for alarm. Maybe most obviously it will not take long before we have a major crisis in pension systems in the Union - already there is a growing concern all over the Union. With ever growing numbers of people over 65 and shrinking numbers of people under 65, the demographic trends are pointing in the direction of a very tangible economic issue.

But of course depopulation has a number of obvious problems attached to it.

So, what can we do about it?

Could immigration be a solution?

Sometimes western Europeans have looked toward Eastern Europe as a fall-back source for easy-to-integrate immigrants. But this is no solution. These countries have ultra-low birthrates of their own, some of them even worse off than the Member States. Of all the countries in the Council of Europe Ukraine has the lowest birth rate of all. Bulgaria, Moldova and Armenia are close by.

With the EU alone needing about 1.6 million immigrants a year above its current level to keep the working-age population stable, a much more likely source of migrants would be Europe's Muslim neighbors, whose young populations are set to almost double.

This is not an easy solution, and it would of course mean a dramatic change for our continent. Basically, it seems that immigration cannot solve the demographic situation in an easy way, if at all.

What we have to do is to address this issue comprehensively. One obvious reason for the low birth rates is of course connected to the role of women. Women of Europe no longer give birth at the same rate we used to do.

Therefore it is time we see the crucial gender dimension in releasing Europe's potential demographically. Let us start to focus on the basic fact that it is the women who give birth. Since our society is still in a large way built on the fact that women not only give birth but also are the basic caregivers to their children we have to start focusing on this factor in assessing the problem of birth rates.

One or two generations ago women became housewives when they married. They stayed at home taking care of the family. For an ever growing number of women this is no longer an option.

A number of studies have indicated that women no longer are prepared to be forced to choose between having a career and having a family. But when they are forced a growing number of women choose having a career.

This has turned out to be the loss of the whole of society. As liberals it would of course be out of the question to demand that women stay at home. This was the old Mussolini and Hitler way - promoting women to be housewives and mothers.

For us as liberals it is course equally out of the question to demand that women choose between work and family. As liberals we believe in free choice. We take it for granted that it would be wrong to stop a man for trying to have a career. Of course the same goes for women. Any woman who wants to make a career should have the possibility to do so.

Therefore the solution is making career and family compatible, for both men and women. We have to find ways to promote the combination of family and children with work.

This is not an issue of the rights of women. This issue is one that the future of Europe depends on, in a very basic way.

I believe that this is so important on a European level that we should try and find ways to also promote this on the European level. What can we learn from each other? Are there any best practices when it comes to ensuring that women and men can combine family and work?

Better child care, promoting fathers taking more responsibility at home - we have to look at these issues also in a demographical perspective.

Increasingly women demand the same thing as men have been expecting, namely to combine a career at work with having children.

As liberals we need to formulate a comprehensive policy in this area. And we need to be both self critical and ready to dig deep.

I am a great fan of John Stuart Mill. He was undoubtedly one of the very first true feminists and I am proud to be a liberal trying to develop his legacy.

As early as 1854 he motioned in the House of Commons for votes for women. It was to take more than 60 years before his political wish was to come true. Today we can easily spot the backwardness of his opponents of the 1850s. He was right, they were wrong. It is as simple as that.

But it is always easy to be correct with hindsight. What we should do now is to put ourselves not in Mills position but to try and see in what way we today are opposing gender equality in a way that people will find ludicrous in 60 years time?

In what way are we today as slow to get the picture as John Stuart Mills opponents were?

If we want to promote a Europe characterized by growth and prosperity.

If we believe in working together for a competitive Europe one of the major issues ahead is to work for **gender equality**.

Without it, there may not even be a Europe in 60 years time.