

Speech by Lenita Freidenvall in the ELDR Congress in Amsterdam (12-14/11/2003)

ELDR Congress

European Liberal Women's Network

November 12-14, 2003 Amsterdam

Obstacles for women in elections and potential solutions -

Ms. Chairperson,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all I would like to extend my thanks to the ELDR and the European Liberal Women's Network for inviting me to your congress. I am invited to talk about obstacles for women in elections and what solutions that can be used to counter these obstacles. I am very happy to be here.

As a profession, I am a researcher at the Department of Political Science at Stockholm University in Sweden. Presently, I am involved in a research project on electoral gender quotas. Quotas are, as we all know, very controversial. Yet quota provisions are being introduced in an increasing number of countries, including all major world regions, democratic and non-democratic, with proportional and majority electoral systems, and at various levels of socio-economic development and religious affiliation. Countries of the most different background, such as Indonesia, Mexico, Morocco, Rwanda, France and Serbia-Montenegro have recently introduced quotas.

INTRODUCTION

In my speech on obstacles and solutions to women's political representation, I would like to start with two quotations. First some few words by the former president of Iceland, Vigdis Finnbogadottir:

"Me personally, I only had one ambition as a child. I wanted to become a captain of a great ship and my father told me: You cannot have that aim. Only men can become captains. Unfortunately he didn't live to see me president."

The second quotation comes from the former prime minister of Norway: Gro Harlem Brundtland, who was the first female prime minister of Norway and the first minister in the world with 50% women in the government. Well, actually the quotation comes from her son, who said:

"Mom, can men become prime ministers?"

These two quotations underscore the importance, I believe, of having political representatives of both sexes at all levels – be they presidents, prime ministers, members of parliament, local politicians. It underscores the value of a balanced parliament. Both young men and young women need role models. Every sex, every boy and girl should have the same possibility, the same opportunity to choose whatever he or she likes. No one, regardless of sex, should be limited by gender, in the choice of a career or plan of life at large.

So, one very important obstacle to women's representation are attitudes – attitudes on gender and gender roles, what women can do according to these norms on gender and what they can not do.

FACTS AND FIGURES

Although women have taken an unprecedented active role in the political events around the world in the last decade, their participation in politics and governance continues to be limited. Obstacles to women's political participation exist throughout the world in prevailing social and economic regimes, as well as in existing political structures. In 2003, the representation of women stands at 15 percent globally. The average for Europe, OSCE member countries, including the Nordic countries, is 17.7% according to statistics from this year. The average of Europe, with the Nordic countries excluded, is 15.5%. While the Nordic countries enjoy an average of about 40% women in parliament, the Arab countries have only about 6% women. Thus, there are great regional variations. Given the slow speed at which the representation of women is increasing, various methods -- such as electoral quotas -- have been proposed or implemented to address the present gender imbalance in decision-making.

Sweden has for many years had the highest proportion of female MPs in the world. Sweden has now stepped down to number two, being challenged by Rwanda, which has 48 % women in parliament. While women make up 45 per cent of the Swedish parliament, the proportion in other countries is less encouraging. In some countries, such as Kuwait, women not even a right to vote. Even within the European Union the situation is anything but encouraging. In Italy and France the parliament consists of only 11 and 12 percent respectively, while women in Greece have merely 8.7 per cent of the seats.

The situation is discouraging also in the applicant countries of Eastern and Central Europe. Some applicant governments have no women at all in their governments, and 7 applicant states are below the current EU average of 17.7% women in parliament. Hungary, Lithuania, Romania, Cyprus, Slovenia and Malta have around 10 %.

In the European Parliament, the average is 31.0% women. 11 countries have an average above 30%. The UK and Portugal have appr. 24% women MPs, while women's political representation in Greece and Italy is below 20%, i.e. 16 and 11.5%.

Thus, although women have taken an unprecedented active role in the political events around the world in the last decade, their participation in politics continues to be limited.

OBSTACLES TO WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

What are then the obstacles to women's representation? Well, several sub-factors have an effect on women's participation in politics: institutional, socio-economic, cultural and strategic factors. Let us start with institutional factors.

Institutional Obstacles

Institutional factors include factors such as the electoral system, district magnitudes, political party list characteristics, party ideology and party rules.

- ***Electoral Systems***

The type of electoral system a country has plays an important part in women's political representation, especially in the developed world. Studies show that proportional representation systems are better suited than majoritarian systems in increasing women's representation. Why is this? Well, scholars explain these disparities by arguing that PR systems offer more opportunities to women, because political parties feel compelled to nominate at least a few women in order to balance their list or their slate of district candidates. In majority electoral systems only one representative from each

constituency is elected. With only one seat the competition is extremely tough. In these competitions women tend not to become elected or they tend to not even stand for election. While the PR system is a positive factor – the majority system is a negative factor – an obstacle.

- ***District magnitude***

Women tend to become elected in a greater amount in larger districts. Why? For instance, a single-transferable vote system (STV) in Ireland or the single-member district system of Britain may experience more difficulty promoting women because for women to enter the party's parliamentary delegation, the incumbents, usually men must lose seats. In contrast, where there are more MPs per district, established politicians within the party may not have to be deposed in order to make room for women. Thus, we expect that the higher the district magnitude, the more likely a party will be to promote women. Or: the more seats available, the less competition. Thus more women. Smaller districts can be seen as obstacles to a high women's representation, also in PR-systems.

- ***Party ideology***

Research also show that party ideology has an effect on the number of women in parliament. Parties to the left tend to be more likely to support women's representation in parliament than rightist parties. Why is this? Leftist parties espouse more egalitarian ideologies, in general. Further, the women's movement has been linked historically to leftist parties. Leftist parties may for instance promote strategies such as quotas because their egalitarian ideology justifies intervention into recruitment process for the sake of balancing power. In contrast, more conservative and liberal parties may extend their idea of equal opportunity to the issue of women's representation arguing that everyone should compete on equal terms. No one should get a free ride. Quotas for women, for example, are seen as specific rights for women and therefore considered a discrimination against men.

- ***New politics/New parties***

The New Politics dimension involves conflict over a new set of issues, such as minority rights and gender equality. Hence a left party in general may not necessarily favour politics to support women, and new left parties may be more amenable to implementing strategies to quickly promote women candidates. Newer parties, in general, are more likely to promote women. New parties must carve out a niche for themselves within the party system, and they may try to attract female voters by making a commitment to ensure female candidates. Further, the new parties also have less to lose if the strategy fails because they do not have loyal groups whose support may be lost.

- ***Party organisation***

The organisational structure of a party may also influence its capacity to promote women MPs. A more centralised level gives party leaders more control to initiate gender politics, when they see fit to do so. Centralised party procedures in general allow party leadership to respond to pressures for measures to increase women's representation, and leadership can be more directly held accountable for the party's failure to take steps to promote women. In contrast, in a more localised process, each region or locality must be pressured separately to adopt measures to promote women.

Socio-economic factors

Socio-economic factors deal with factors such as women's labour force participation, women's educational level, and the development of the welfare system. All these factors have a positive effect on women's political representation. Women in the western world today experience at least two social and economic obstacles to becoming politicians. First, they have fewer of the resources needed to enter politics. Women are poorer than men and are less likely to be employed in occupations that are supportive of political activism. Secondly, various life-style constraints mean women have less time for politics. Family and other caring responsibilities are typically undertaken by women, reducing the time available for other activities.

Cultural factors

Cultural factors such as religiosity and attitudes on gender equality are also important. Protestant countries for instance tend to have a higher level of women MPs than Catholic.

Thus, the high representation of women in Nordic parliaments can be explained by several factors, such as the system of proportional representation, the party list system, the early development of a social welfare system, women's opportunity to study and gain employment, and secular religious affiliation. However, these are only structural factors. They do not explain all. We also need to discuss the importance of strategic factors. We need to emphasise what actors do and do not, actors such as the political parties, the women's sections within the political parties, etc.

Strategic factors

In Sweden, for instance, all parties – more or less – have a high proportion of women in parliament – not only the leftist parties, not only the new parties, or post-materialistic parties. For instance,

- The Centre Party has had the highest proportion of women in parliament most frequently in Sweden since the 1970s.
- The Liberal party was the first party in Sweden to adopt concrete measures to increase the number of women in parliament.
 1. In 1972, the Liberal Party introduced a policy of a minimum of 40 percent of either sex in internal boards and committees.
 2. In 1974, the party recommended the constituencies to place at least one woman on a safe seat on the party list. In case the constituency just had one safe seat, the constituency was recommended to place one woman in either the safe seat or the next place on the party list.
 3. In 1988, the Liberal party extended its policies by recommending *the zipping system*, according to which men and women are alternated on the party list.

These strategic measures were extremely important for the amount of liberal female MPs in Sweden. As strategies these measures were considered as recommendations. Every party district should decide for itself on its rules regarding the selection and nomination process. But it was recommended to promote women, with the argument that women are also citizens and have a democratic right to be included. Women are not part of the specific, but part of the universal. If there are formal or informal and hidden barriers that prevent women from coming forward in the selection process, the party should intervene to secure equal opportunity.

These measures for the promotion of women MPs – introduced by the Liberals as early as the 1970s – were also extremely important for the general development of women's political representation in Sweden. The Liberals started a chain reaction. More or less all parties have, since then, introduced special measures. No party wanted to be considered backwards and old-fashioned. Most parties understood the number of votes that could be attracted. However, in the promotion of women MPs, the parties have used different strategies. Some parties such as the Left Party, the Greens, and the Social Democratic Party have preferred quotas – that is mandatory rules of the amount of women on electoral lists. Other parties have preferred recommendations or targets on a certain level or proportion of women – such as the Liberal Party in 1972 and the Christian Democratic Party in 1987. The Swedish development can be characterised as one of competition between the parties on recruiting as many women MPs as possible. The high proportion of women in Swedish parliament began to increase, when the parties began this competition, to be blunt.

NORMATIVE OBSTACLES

We have now talked about factors/obstacles at the meta-level, the structural obstacles. We have also talked about the importance of actors developing strategies. But, we also need to dwell on obstacles at the more concrete, local level. We might call them informal obstacles, or normative obstacles

Attitudes

As I said in the introduction, attitudes and norms on what a woman or a man is supposed to behave like, look like, to work with differ. Gender norms restrict our capacity to act as human being, as individuals. In most countries men dominate the political arena. This gives signals to the public that politics is a man's game. This may restrict women in coming forward, it may also restrict men from selecting women.

Masculine Model of Politics

Since men still dominate the political arena, they also formulate the rules of the political game and define the standards for evaluation. Of course, all men are not equal with regards to interests, experience, ideas, etc. as well as all women are not the same. We all have multiple identities. Since women tend to have different work experiences, tend to take a greater responsibility for children and the home, women and men's life experiences could vary. Since men still dominate the political arena, the existence of this male-dominated model, or masculine model of politics, is reproduced. This might hinder some women from seeking political office.

Selection and nomination process

What is of central importance regarding women's representation in parliament is the selection and nomination process. Here normative ideas on who should be selected and why are of central importance. Here we find the gatekeepers – the selectors. The gatekeepers ideas' on who should be selected and why have great influence on women's capacity to come forward.

There is fairly little research on the nomination process from a gender perspective. However, research shows that:

- Voters do not penalise women candidates. The problem is that political parties do not select women in sufficient numbers in safe or winnable parliamentary seats.
- Although fewer women than men come forward for selection, women are not selected in proportion to the numbers who come forward. This suggests that the key problem is one of demand – that many constituencies do not want to select women. We need to know who selects whom, and why?
- Discrimination against women has been reported to be present throughout the selection processes to a greater or lesser extent in all political parties. In a British study of the selection process in political parties, liberal women reported that women were frequently being asked question that men were not, particularly regarding their childcare responsibilities.
- There exists a self-perpetuating male candidate syndrome, whereby selectorates choose candidates that match their pre-considered idea of what an MP should be like – i.e. like the last one. This syndrome is present to varying degrees in all the major parties. In a study of the British parties, liberal women said they felt that the selectorate had cultural preconceptions about what an MP "should be," based on the existing Liberal MPs.

- Male selectors have the perception that women do not want to make a political career, and that the family is the dominant barrier for their entrance into politics. This perception might result in statements such as "women don't want" or "there are no women" (because many of the aspirant women have children and they are not supposed to want to run for election). When asking women it shows that they lack neither will nor ambition. They do not think that the family is the dominant barrier, even if they do have the main responsibility for home and children. They argue that their main barrier is the political organization and the powerlessness they feel in not being able to change structures within politics.
- Favourite candidates who are virtually guaranteed selection before the process even starts are reported as a problem in all political parties. These favourite candidates often receive undue help both locally and centrally. Most of the reported allegations of corruption were instances of attempts to secure seats for favourites.
- When women felt that there had been misconduct during a selection, they were reluctant to complain. They felt they would gain a reputation as a troublemaker and risk their chances of selection in future seats.

My interviews with selection committee members demonstrate that it is extremely important with women selectors. Women in the selection or nomination committee are important for all parties, regardless of quota provisions or not. For parties with quota provisions, women selectors were extremely important in supervising the quota system, to check that it was implemented. Just because you have adopted a quota system does not mean that the system will be implemented, especially if there are no sanctions.

For parties without quota provisions, women selectors had the informal but de facto responsibility for the selection and ordering of women. Women selectors in all parties checked that women were nominated, that women were put on the list in adequate numbers, and that women also were in top positions. **No or few women in the selection committee resulted in few women on the list.**

STRATEGIES – OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES

I would finally like to share some concrete strategies to increase the number of women in parliament.

- **General party goals** on women's representation in politics, **rhetorical strategies** whereby claims for sex equality are formally accepted and voice on campaign platforms are good.
- **Targets and recommendations** on a certain level of women on party lists and **positive action strategies** which include voluntary activities such as the provision for special training for women are good.
- Finally, **quotas**, which make the selection of women mandatory, are the most effective and quickest strategy. In Sweden, which by many countries has been seen as a model, it took about 70 years for women to achieve about 40% of the seats. Women today might not be willing to wait that long!

However, in some countries and in some parties quotas have not had a significant effect on the numbers of women being selected. Quotas have also been described by women as being counter-productive, resulting in them spending time, money and emotional and physical energy campaigning for seats they thought they had a realistic chance of winning, when in reality they were there simply to meet the quota. In some countries the adoption of quotas has been very successful. In other countries, the mere threat of a quota has spurred parties to promote more women. So far, however, we know too little about the implementation and effect of quotas.

Based on my own and other research, my list of recommendation consists of the following concrete strategies:

General strategies:

- make support for equality of women and men's representation a central and well-published goal
- set and monitor targets of women's representation in the party structure and in elected office
- publish regular reports on progress
- educate members and officials in equal opportunities recruitment practices
- ensure selection practices do not contain explicit or implicit barriers to women

Strategies to mobilise women

- encourage women to stand for election
- educate women candidates (courses, mentor projects, networks, meetings like this)
- plan meeting schedules with politicians with caring responsibilities

Strategies in the nomination phase

- nominate women
- speak for women
- support women in by-elections
- select women selectors

Strategies in the election phase

- encourage voters to vote for a women (where it is possible)
- have meetings with women candidates, organise women candidate schools
- launch women candidates in the election campaign, in the election material
- launch women candidates in media

Finally, let us go back to the former Icelandic President, Vigdis Finnbogadottir.

In spite her father assuring that "girls don't do that", Finnbogadottir lived her dream – she became a female politician, a female leader. Our job – as politicians, as scholars - is to serve as role models and help women and men of today and tomorrow to make their dreams come true, whatever they might be.

Thank you.