

Europe's male cartel should be broken

Margot Wallström

The Dutch economist, lawyer and author, Heleen Mees, wrote in the Financial Times recently: "Male dominance works like a cartel: it impedes proper functioning of the market by barring talented women from top jobs. The old boy network should be busted like any other cartel."

Anyone who has seen the photos of the European Union heads of state and governments gathered at the European Council or for other important occasions, such as signing the Treaty of Lisbon, will have been struck by the scarcity of women in the picture.

How is it possible that, while women make up half of the population, they are still so poorly represented at the top in European politics?

The European Commission's latest report on women and men in decision-making roles in 2007 shows progress. Even so, less than a third of the representatives in the European Parliament are women. In national parliaments and governments in the EU the situation varies considerably, but the overall average is that they are only 23 per cent female. The European Commission performs slightly better, with nine female commissioners out of 27, or 33 per cent of the total.

In Spain, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero recently became the first prime minister to lead a government in which a majority of ministers are women. It is also the first Spanish government to have a woman minister for defence and a minister for equality. Clearly, the government is more reflective of the society it represents. Spain's laws, which were inspired by Norway's experience with legal quotas for women, ensure that at least 40 per cent of election candidates are women. However, the Spanish situation is countered by, for example, the record of Italy:

It is not about a shortage of capable female politicians, but rather a question of men choosing men

Silvio Berlusconi's 21-member cabinet includes only four women.

Next year will be an important one for the development of European democracy. There will be elections for the European Parliament and at least four top posts will be filled in Europe's institutional machinery. We will see a fresh line-up of European commissioners (including, of course, the post of president of the Commission), a change

of president for the European Parliament and, if the Lisbon treaty enters into force, for the European Council and a new high representative for foreign affairs, who will be vice-president of the Commission.

Speculation has started in the media about who will occupy these top EU posts. The need to achieve the right balance – of geographical areas, old and new members and candidates from across the political spectrum – has been mentioned. But what about the gender balance? In 50 years there has never been a female Commission president and only two presidents of the European Parliament. Even so, in all the discussions about top posts, the issue of the gender imbalance has not been raised.

The argument that "there are no competent women for the job" has been put forward. What about Angela Merkel, chancellor of Germany, Tarja Halonen, president of Finland, Vaira Vike-Freiberga, president of Latvia 1999-2007, Mary Robinson, president of Ireland 1990-97, Dora Bakoyannis, foreign minister of Greece, Ursula Plassnik, foreign minister of Austria, Margaret Beckett, former British foreign secretary, or Emma Bonino, former Italian minister for trade and European commissioner, to name just a few?

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I call on heads of state and government, leaders of all the European political parties, social partners and civil society to engage in an active campaign to increase the presence of women actively engaged for Europe.

This is a call for action that aims to: ensure the equal representation of women among the top posts to be appointed next year; increase the presence of women on the lists for the European elections; and increase the female voter turnout in the European Parliament election in June 2009.

It is high time we broke the male cartel in politics. It is not a question of whether women would do better than men – although they would certainly do equally well – but that they would do things differently. Women and men, with their different knowledge and experience, complement each other. Including women in the decision-making process is about democratic representation. Nothing more and nothing less.

The writer is vice-president of the European Commission and chair of the Council of Women World Leaders ministerial initiative