

Gender equality initiatives have been worryingly absent from the policies of the Barroso II commission, writes Myria Vassiliadou

On the occasion of international women's day earlier this year, European commission president José Manuel Barroso announced with great fanfare a women's charter, a political document reiterating the strong commitment of his new team to promoting women's rights and making gender equality a reality in the EU. Simultaneously, Barroso presented the commission's proposal for the EU 2020 strategy, perhaps the most important framework instrument by which medium-term societal and economic change can be achieved at European level. Women's rights and gender equality issues were absent from this document.

This inconsistent performance of the commission is illustrative of a broader phenomenon, and highlights the continuous challenge that the European Women's Lobby (EWL), its members across Europe and partners face in bringing about substantial and consistent actions towards gender equality in the EU. Despite being a treaty obligation, the full realisation of equality between women and men and the implementation of gender mainstreaming leaves a lot to be desired. Goodwill leads to declaratory initiatives, but indicators show little progress on the ground. This is true even within the European institutions. While Barroso and a number of his commissioners are signatories of the EWL's 50/50 campaign for democracy committing to the equal representation of women and men in decision making within the EU institutions, and while many MEPs made it a condition of their approval of the Barroso II commission that women be democratically represented at this level, no measures have been taken to implement this commitment. For example, despite additional reminders of the commission's legal and



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moral duty to promote gender equality, we have seen no move to seize the opportunity for structural change and take parity at all levels of decision making into account in the formation of the external action service. Indeed, while Catherine Ashton has committed herself to support gender equality, every single one of her special representatives is male, as are, for the moment, all of the nominees to these new posts.

Another example of inconsistency concerns combating male violence against women – a crucial issue, at last put firmly on the EU agenda by the European parliament and the Spanish EU presidency. We welcome president Barroso's positive response to a request to join the UN secretary general's network of male leaders against violence against women. Nonetheless, despite support from MEPs and calls by ourselves and our partners for political agreement to move forward, the commission failed to give strong backing to Spanish proposals for a European protection order to protect victims of violence. Considering that 45 per cent of women in Europe suffer from male violence and one in five is a victim of violence within an intimate partnership, the urgency of this measure is evident.

Gender equality is a fundamental right and value of the EU and should be central to all commission initiatives, policies and programmes. It is a legal, moral and economic imperative, not a luxury to be addressed sporadically or only during times of prosperity. While some positive steps are being prepared in this area – including a new commission action plan which will hopefully give flesh and bones to commitments – so far, the Barroso II commission's performance has been disturbingly mixed, and concrete actions in favour of a more equal society have been few. At a time when the EU's democratic legitimacy is being increasingly called into question, and as the crisis casts doubt on the sustainability of unreformed European socio-economic models, the price of gender inequalities is one Europe cannot afford. It is time for the commission, and all other stakeholders, to take this prospect seriously. ★

John Monks wants tackling unemployment and improving economic governance to top the commission's agenda for the next five years

To emerge from the present-day slump, the EU must be determined to establish growth as its key objective. For the moment, we are not seeing any strategy based on growth. Instead, the approach seems to be based solely on advising member states to pay their debts. We therefore expect the current European commission to make growth one of its priorities.

The commission is submerged in a situation which it has never had to cope with until now. It is a tremendous challenge for the college and its president to confront the turmoil by giving a clear course of action and responses to European citizens, who are feeling the impact of the crisis in their daily lives. The EU 2020 strategy forms part of the Barroso II commission's political programme. The 2020 strategy has become the commission's new flagship initiative and I believe this is a mistake. The immediate problems need to be the top priorities, including measures to create jobs, particularly jobs for young people, European economic governance and effective financial regulations to reverse the trend of high-risk speculation. The