

Up to the challenge

Myria Vassiliadou calls on MEPs to show progressive leadership when it comes to gender equality

Over the last 100 years, much progress has been made for women's rights in Europe, and over the last half century, the EU has played a significant role in this regard. At both the European and international level, strong legal instruments are in place to face up to the remaining challenges to real equality between women and men, including the UN treaty eliminating discrimination against women, the European treaties and the charter of fundamental rights. What is lacking is implementation. For this, sustained political will and concerted action is required from all stakeholders, not least the members of the European parliament.

The EU's commitment to fundamental rights and human dignity is reflected in its designation of 2010 as the European year to combat poverty and social exclusion. To address the inequalities scarring our societies, the EU must start with the most prevalent among them – inequalities between women and men. Now more than ever, the European parliament must integrate this issue in all economic and social policies to ensure that the current economic and financial crisis does not deepen inequalities, further accentuating the pay gap and women's already high poverty rates.

As the democratically-elected representatives of the women and men of Europe, MEPs have both the ability and the responsibility to tackle these challenges. Over the coming weeks, MEPs will debate and vote on the maternity leave directive. It is crucial that parliament puts the fundamental rights of the people of Europe first, and guarantees adequate duration of leave and full remuneration for mothers and fathers. In the Europe 2020 socio-economic strategy, MEPs must insist on the integration of a strong gender equality dimension. Only by showing progressive leadership on such issues, which impact upon the fundamental division of



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labour and opportunities between women and men, can MEPs fulfil their legal and moral responsibilities towards their fellow Europeans.

Another issue high on the political agenda at the moment is male violence against women. The declaration on domestic violence attached to the treaty of Lisbon and the priority given to this issue by the Spanish presidency are welcome. Now is the

time for MEPs to exert pressure on member states to legislate at European level against this most fundamental and widespread violation of women's basic human rights.

The European Women's Lobby believes 2010 to be a year of opportunities, which no one committed to human rights and equality between women and men can afford to miss. Upcoming socio-economic initiatives and the current political willingness to legally address violence against women are two such opportunities. MEPs also have a role to play in ensuring the concrete implementation of the Lisbon treaty and the application of the charter of fundamental rights provide the framework for progress towards a society guaranteeing equal rights to all. Finally, it is crucial that MEPs themselves respect European gender equality obligations and introduce an electoral system ensuring the equal representation of women and men among their own ranks. The European parliament is the beacon of democracy in Europe. We count on its members to prove themselves worthy this year of the confidence the women and men of Europe have placed in them to protect and promote their rights and interests. ★

