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**“Gender, Local Government and Public Policies.  
The Europe of Local Parity yet to Be Done”**

**Prof. Jacqueline HEINEN**

**Professor Emeritus of Sociology  
University of Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (UVSQ)**

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## **“ Gender, Local Government and Public Policies. The Europe of Local Parity yet to Be Done ”**

**Jacqueline HEINEN**

Professor Emeritus of Sociology

University of Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (UVSQ)

### **Introduction**

The non-inclusion of gender differences and the under-representation of women in the political area have been identified as an obstacle to social change. For socio-historical reasons, the role of women in the public sphere has been systematically minimized. Many studies have shown that in most cases, they are still far from being as numerous as men in decision-making bodies, whether in elected assemblies, in governing bodies or in administrations. Thinking about measures to fight against what makes that women are usually second-class citizens is rarely part of the political agenda, except in a subsidiary way. What happens at the local level, much less studied so far than the national level?

A research was conducted for three years, from spring 2000 to spring 2003, in some eighty cities of seven European Union (EU) countries – Belgium, France, Greece, Finland, Italy, Portugal and Sweden (Heinen, Lieber 2004). Specific attention was paid to the influence of NGO and to the role of administrative authorities in these countries that represent a broad spectrum of nation states where democracy has been stabilized at different points in time and where women's political representation in elected bodies is more or less well established but very uneven (ranging from 42% in Sweden to 4% in Greece when the research began). The research addressed a number of key questions. What do these changes mean in terms of democratic practices? And in this framework, what are the effects of the gendered composition of elected political bodies and women's dynamic contribution to the fate of local communities? And does it have an impact on the interaction with the informal political sphere (NGOs)?

By its international comparative dimension, this research intended to both complement the knowledge gaps concerning gender relations at the local level and highlight the variety of practices in these seven EU countries. Case studies were undertaken in about 80 cities and some 600 in-depth interviews were conducted with male and female councillors, heads of local administrations and representatives of NGOs. Attention was focused on three fields of local policies: the question of dependent persons, urbanism and local security. The idea was to assess whether or not the policies implemented bring changes in local and

urban government and whether they encourage women to become politically involved, to examine the interactions between elected bodies, local associations and other levels of decision-making (inter-communal, European) and to scrutinize the scope of change in local policies as well as the commitment of elected representatives to taking the gender dimension into account in their governmental practice.

I cannot account for the resulting kaleidoscope of such a broad investigation and will focus here on three key issues. First, the difficulties experienced by the majority of our interlocutors in conceiving the differences of material situations and statutes related to the gender relations – and thus their resistance to acknowledging the need for specific actions to overcome existing inequalities. Secondly, the importance of various institutional factors in the configuration of local gender relations. Finally, the elements that, beyond the differences of contexts, emerged as nodal point to promote the inclusion of the gender issue in local politics.

## **I. Conceptual problems in thinking gender differences**

This research on gender and local democracy highlighted the obvious difficulty, in most people interviewed, not only to give a precise content to the concept of gender, but to think democracy as a dynamic that include individuals whose political and social identity depends on their sex (Phillips 2004). If other categories (age, social or ethnic origin) were more easily taken into account, the gender posed a clear problem. The idea that because of historical processes – by definition contingent, and variable across countries and periods – the interests and needs of people may differ depending on whether they are men or women, and that it is therefore necessary to take this dimension into account, was far from being evident. This partly explains the hesitations and contradictions relating to the use of concepts such as equality, difference, discrimination, general interest, universalism or citizenship.

The marginalization or non-inclusion of women in politics does not only result from the fact that the structures of political life have been formed without them (democracy is born without women), but because the dominant discourse includes rarely a true reflection on the reason for this. The division of labor in the private sphere was usually ignored, as if the priority assignment of women to domestic tasks did not determine a lot of discriminations and inequalities in other spheres of society. However, the usefulness of their participation in the political sphere was most often presented as an extension of their experience in the field of reproduction – there was also a general tendency to operate a semantic, and sometimes conceptual shift between women and mothers, and between women and families. Hence the projection – although far from a dynamic understanding of the concept of gender – to usually view the contribution of women in politics as a complementary element, but also often as a ‘foreign body’ representing the otherness while the men would embody the norm.

The term difference, which has been at the heart of debates on the citizenship of women, was very present in the speeches of our interlocutors – except in Sweden where gender equality is displayed by most local councillors. It generally referred to an essentialist vision of women's place in society. In doing so, elected, administrative and associative representatives interviewed agreed – consciously or not – with the trends of public opinion which emphasize the unique qualities that women are supposed to bring to political practice, because of their own experience as mothers and as persons responsible for the well-being of others. In this case, the insistence on the difference often focused on the fact – and on this point only – that the increase in the number of elected women should help transforming the management of public affairs for the role of women in the private sphere, which is characterized by the ethical dimension of relationships between individuals, as opposed to what happens in the public sphere.

This is the argument that convinced many elected officials hitherto reluctant to take steps to increase the proportion of women in decision-making bodies: the idea that they would carry skills other than those of current holders of power seemed attractive to fight against the crisis of confidence in the political class which in almost all countries expresses itself by the ever increasing rates of abstention and the increasing volatility of the electorate. Such an approach, however, takes the risk to confine women – and therefore the men – in preconceived categories by attributing to women (and only to them) the ability to respond to needs related to daily life and to moralize politics – in other words, ‘doing politics differently’.

This vision is necessarily reductive when it amounts to defining the abilities of ones and others, in terms of citizenship, from rigid gender criteria – automatically categorizing women in one group and men in another on behalf of predefined principles of identity, and thereby denying the diversity of society (Lépinard 2007). We have indeed found a clear trend among men, but also among women, to reify the gender category: ‘the’ women, ‘the’ men. This means not only to deny the differences between individuals – especially for women: the woman (in the singular), the wife – but to recreate gender according to the traditional boundaries, even where there are signs of change in gender relations, with the (sometimes massive) entry of women in the political sphere. However, the differences between women and men were hardly mentioned.

Regarding the notion of equality, our interlocutors seemed at first sight to abound in the direction of Joan Scott when she postulates that paradoxes are in the heart of citizenship – beginning with that of women – and that one cannot oppose equality and difference as the two concepts “*are interdependent and necessarily in tension*” (2002, p. 21). Indeed, the interviewees often combined in the same breath talk about the difference and proclamations of commitment to the principle of equality between all individuals. Except that rather than putting these words in their context, as Scott for whom these tensions “*occur in ways historically determined*”, they used them as if they were timeless realities or choices, speaking of *the* difference in the singular to mean what, in their view, distinguishes the practices of women in politics. And thus they did not question the

existence or not, at the local level, of measures to restore the *'balance of power between the sexes'*, in the words of Norbert Elias (2000).

While the subject of formal equality (or equality of rights) was very frequently raised about gender relations, coupled with that of universal citizenship, one could not but be struck by the lack of consideration of gender as a category on which material disparities are based concerning citizenship (Lister 2007). More than one elected explained the presence on the electoral roll, of youth or citizens of foreign origin (including non-European) by differences in status and enrolment in the city. However, the arguments relating to the inclusion of women in the lists were primarily numerical: 'we are short of women'. The issue of the role assigned to men and women in social reality is mentioned very seldom, as well as the gap between formal and real rights or measures that should be taken to remedy the *de facto* inequalities in professional life, family and politics.

One of the surprises of this research was that, with the exception of Sweden, the terms of general interest or universalism, that one expected especially in France, returned on the lips of elected councillors in all countries surveyed when it came to the rights of men and women. Sometimes the term was used to oppose affirmative action (quotas, parity), which provide an increased presence of women in politics, in the name of the refusal to make distinctions between individuals – this is a fallacious argument because it is well known that laws on other points, fit perfectly with specific categories to produce equality (Gaspard 1998, p. 210). But it is important to note that universalism was called to the rescue mainly to remove contingent measures aiming at meeting specific material and social needs of women's (for example, when it was question of violence or organization of urban space). Hence one had the feeling of a somewhat abstract vision of citizenship and of a poor consideration of the unequal power relations between the sexes – an attitude observed including among many of the elected representatives of the Nordic countries.

As for it, the word discrimination, which refers to concrete manifestations of marginalization or exclusion of individuals or groups of individuals from political and social life and which generally goes along with proposals of action to overcome *de facto* inequalities was almost completely absent from the spontaneous speech and was veiled by the idea of formal equality among all citizens. Only certain elected Nordic feminists for whom the promotion of gender equality is an integral part of their political identity used the term, emphasizing precisely the persistence of discrimination against women in local politics.

Broadly speaking, we did not feel that the controversy on citizenship over the desirable participation of individuals in the affairs of the city, or on the nature of discussions over the defence of individual, collective or groups' interests had had a lasting impact on the minds of elected officials and of local actors more generally. However, these are questions that have gone through the ranks not only of researchers, including political scientists, but to some extent, those of political parties and national parliaments. When the concept of citizenship was mobilized by the interviewees, it was much more in reference to general principles than to its concrete application in relation to everyday and local life.

**Affirmative action: a contested principle**

The principle of affirmative action as a means to counter the dynamics that discriminated groups remain or become more so, is in fact little appreciated by most local politicians that we met. Such measures – whether incentives or binding – aim in this case at promoting the full integration of women in public, political or professional life. The quotas are one example of this, preference clauses in hiring, with equal diploma, are another, or encouraging men to become more involved in the private sphere and to provide a part of the tasks previously assigned to women – some parental or paternity leaves, especially in the Nordic countries, are an illustration of that.

Designed to counter the effects of seemingly neutral laws that in fact lead to discrimination for failing to take into account of initial inequalities, affirmative action *might* reinforce the existing differences and extend the image of women as weak beings who need protection (such a risk does not exist in the case of positive action addressing men). Because affirmative action requires naming groups that are discriminated against, it assumes at the same time to recognize their differences and might be used as a mode of confinement in a predetermined identity. But it should be noted that people we spoke to did rarely formulate the problem in such sophisticated terms. One cannot say that the idea of affirmative action was rejected first of all in the name of the principle of equality and the risk of social fragmentation. It was only in the case of women that the concept of general interest was used to criticize a procedure that does not put all individuals on the same footing, and the distinction between formal and actual rights was not addressed.

Coming from male partners, this objection should probably be interpreted as the fear that the claims related to gender affirmative action programs weaken some of their privileges in the economic, social and political arena. This was shown in the tendency of many elected officials (mostly men), when examples of inequality and oppression of women were mentioned, such as violence in the home or public space, to move the problem by speaking of violence against other social categories. Such a reaction amounts to minimize the discrimination that women suffer (Lieber, 2008). It should be noted that this type of discourse was shared by many women interviewed, who rejected the idea of specific measures, either by denying the existence of discrimination, or by attributing to women themselves the responsibility for the difficulties that they meet. Thus, these elected women manifested reluctance, and even their refusal to support demands that would apply the label of feminist and that would, they thought, stigmatize them in the eyes of their colleagues.

This shows how much the idea of a change in power relations between the sexes is scaring. The very low or non-integration of the gender issue at the local level (more than at the European or national level) can be explained by the desire of elected male officials (but also of elected women) to maintain the habit and cultural frameworks acquired, to postpone concrete changes that the decision to implement material measures aiming at removing existing inequalities would inevitably entail in social relations. Where

proclaimed changes at the national level may be limited to statements of intent or to laws that often keep a formal character, local practice is likely to lead to more concrete changes and immediate source of tension. This is why moves supposed to increase the proportion of women in elected bodies (especially when they occur suddenly, in connection with a change of legislation) are often perceived as a threat by elected people – men, of course, but also some women. The latter take their distance with the consequences of policies adopted, when they do not outright oppose them since they fear to be no longer viewed according to their skills but because of their sex.

Undoubtedly, these reserves slow the development of mechanisms that help making an inventory of relations between men and women in decision-making, measuring the differences – and, if so, progress. To highlight the distance that separates women from decision-making positions is a heuristic approach because it generally strikes people's minds. It is a complex operation that requires not only access to statistics segregated by sex in a variety of areas (and we know the obstacles in this regard in most countries), but it is also a fruitful approach from a theoretical point of view since it requires to specify the criteria on which the proposed analysis is based, and this often stirs innovative debates. The use of gendered data to scrutinize the budgets at the municipal level is, experience shows, a powerful lever to uncover the inequalities of treatment between men and women in the management of public funds.

Ignorance of local elected officials in this area was therefore all the more shocking. The problems identified at the national level to obtain data showing the gender dimension of social reality appeared tenfold increased at the local level where governments did still very rarely adopt means to grasp the differences of status and situations under the angle of gender. Local security policies, for example, were almost always blind to this dimension. And where such statistics existed, it very rarely coincided, especially at the local level, with the establishment of monitoring bodies in charge of enforcing measures to correct the inequalities observed. Yet it is at the local level that gender inequalities regarding citizenship are most sensitive, materially speaking, even if it is not there that they are most visible in terms of political representation.

The ignorance of most elected officials met concerning the content of official documents on these inequalities and the measures proposed to remedy the situation (whether laws, conventions or treaties national and international) is a sign that does not mislead: it symbolizes blatantly the sum of reluctances mentioned above to initiate a resolute action for removing the gendered connotation of the political field, so that it becomes a space open to both women and men and aims at moving towards gender equality in all areas of implementation of political decisions.

## **II. Weight of the institutional context**

The municipalities are, on the one hand, the embodiment of the practice of democracy at the local level and, secondly, the bodies that ensure the implementation of decisions taken at other levels – state or regional level. This dual function is carrying a tension

related to the inability to harmoniously combine two contradictory tasks. We can assume that the broader the scope of municipal decision is, the most they are reluctant to comply with the directives of a central government willing to submit them to its power. Conversely, the less their power is extended, and the more they agree to adapt to the centralized state and its injunctions. This is at least what can be deduced from general trends observed in Europe during the 90s, a period marked jointly by a process of decentralization to the local and the transformation of practices of power at the municipal level. These processes have, of course, taken different forms in the seven countries that concern us here.

### **The decentralization process**

Internal changes in terms of local politics are more important in some countries than in others, but various studies (Pollit *et al.*, 2002) show that in all countries of the European Union (EU), the municipalities have been the object of strong reorganizations since the 1980s. From observations on the ground, it is clear that in many cases, women entered institutions in the process of narrowing, i.e. bodies having lost some of their power to other arenas of decision. On the other hand, the arrival of women sometimes produces a chain reaction: the places of true power tend to move to others, often non-institutionalized and outside of any democratic control. Informal networks of decision that bring together various community leaders – business representatives, politicians, high-ranking state servants – are the typical example. It is therefore important to ask who really holds the power: the City Council, the executive, the administration, the mayor, the cabinet of the mayor or other local bodies? What changes have taken place in the division and the power relations between these bodies during the period 1990-2000? Did the arrival of women in larger number influence these changes?

In France, for example, if the principle of parity has led to a significant change in men/women ratios at the local level since the municipal elections of 2001, one cannot minimize the consequences of other factors. Starting with the increasing importance given to inter-communal structures, which tend to weaken the role of local authorities – and that of women because they are extremely poorly represented in most cases, within these structures where the principle of parity does not apply. In Finland, given the financial problems resulting from the decentralization process, it appeared that all municipalities included in the study had been forced to establish priorities in their fields of intervention. This has led, in most cases, to give priority to those areas prescribed by law. Thus, the decentralization of central government, in the early 90s, induced very negative consequences for the interests of women: the suspension of local committees of gender equality after the reform has sounded the knell of policies promoting gender equality. And the economic recession contributed to this process: the functions of municipalities impossible to circumvent were decreed priority. In Belgium, municipalities have also been facing problems of funding in 90 years. These resulted in part from decisions taken at the supra-communal level, but also from the impoverishment of the population and related social problems. Just as in Finland, these problems have led municipalities to establish priorities. The social sector has been the victim, and women have been doubly affected: as



citizens as they are more often than men in precarious situation, and therefore more demanding social services affected by budget cuts and as employees of municipalities, since changes have affected the conditions of employment in municipalities.

### **Impact of political configurations and of management styles**

Other factors than the decentralization process come into play. One of them relates to the respective power of the City Council and the local executive. In most cases, except for Sweden, the councillors interviewed considered their power low and felt it had considerably been reduced in recent years. This view was also shared by some local civil servants. The metaphor of the 'rubber stamp' was used in various interviews to describe the outcome of a process by which City Council would only confirm the decisions taken elsewhere (whether by the executive, by the cabinet of mayor or the administration), without exerting much influence.

We can not of course generalize unfairly considerations on the weakening of the City Council because there is rarely a single model at the national level. The political orientation, the degree of urbanization, average income, and political representation of women within the municipality are all factors that contribute to draw a variety of configurations in the matter. In Sweden, in particular, the City Council has never played a major role in local politics. This role is on the executive committee and especially its chairman and, where appropriate, on the Presidium of which some members are paid to do the political work. In large Swedish cities, the chairmen of committees who weigh more are also influential persons. The trend in recent years has been to remove the small-scale commissions and combine them in bodies with a broader scope of decision. But it was done without affecting the position of women, still in progress, nor the number of women chairpersons of committees.

The figure of the mayor and the authority he exercises are also of great importance. In countries of southern Europe, the entire political system is based on the local mayor, giving him enormous power, so his personality and his convictions weigh as much in the balance as his partisan affiliation. His relative autonomy confers him a degree of action that allows him to develop original options in the field of public policies, which are not necessarily a priority for his party. This system is sometimes a double-edged sword with regard to gender policies. If the mayor is aware of the issue of gender equality, policies of the city will be heavily influenced as there is a greater attention and greater responsiveness to the gender issue – as we have seen in Sintra and in Montijo, Portugal, whose municipalities were headed by women aware of these issues with real consequences on the measures adopted by the local authority. But in the opposite case, it might be quite difficult to initiate such an orientation. The concentration of power in the hands of the mayor is therefore crucial, as his interest in this topic appears decisive to engage or not actions at the local level.

The status of local elected is another contributing factor to facilitate or not the inclusion of women among those elected. In countries where the councillors are not paid, many

people do not feel able to control all information that a decision requires. Everywhere, political life tends to become more professional, which is not without impact on the political careers of women. The difficult balance between occupational and political work-life makes the traditional 'conciliation' between public and private spheres even more challenging. Now, surveys show all over Europe that women spend much more time than men on domestic work, and the issue of timetable is seen as part of the main obstacles to women's involvement in decision-making bodies – thereby restricting their place in political power. Only measures involving payment of a greater number of political functions, in order to leave his/her professional work for a time, along with increased administrative support and training measures for political tasks could have positive consequences for women.

Another important factor concerns the place accorded to the opposition in the executive, which is not without relevance to the more or less strong involvement of women in positions of power. Everywhere, there is an executive body, whether a group of councillors or the cabinet of mayor, or an unofficial group, but the presence of members of the minority within it differs from one country to another. When only 'winning' political parties have access to the executive, consisting then of elected representatives of the majority of the Council, and when the opposition is excluded (which is the most frequent situation in Greece, France and Italy), such a state of is not without influencing the functioning of democracy at the municipal level, encouraging or otherwise hindering the arrival of newly elected councillors in local politics. This is particularly true for women in countries where they are still poorly represented in the decision-making bodies: they may hesitate to commit themselves if it is to play a purely formal role in the local assembly.

Finally, the management style implemented to administer the town affairs also weights on gender relations in local power. The reorganization of the administration which is usually associated with the principles of neo-liberal management based on the model of private sector, called New Public Management in the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries, has changed the strategy of many Councils. These changes, which result in the search for greater economic efficiency in the conduct of local affairs, often have negative effects on women's participation in political bodies. They often result in assigning a greater role to the central services of the municipality, or strengthen the role of the mayor by a greater personalization of political power. This minimizes the role of all elected councillors, and particularly of newly elected ones, male or female.

Conversely, an allocation of responsibilities to open up the areas traditionally occupied by men and women in municipal governments can play a dynamic role in breaking down the stereotypes that associate 'technical' and 'competence' with 'male', as opposed to 'social' and 'qualities' associated to 'female'. The examples offered by various cities show that the feminization of decision-making positions in local administration often facilitates the task of elected women councillors for whom it is then easier to take the head of intervention sectors with strong technique connotations, traditionally assigned to men, such as urban planning. They have then less difficulty in establishing their authority. When

these two processes do not go hand in hand, the pressure is sometimes very high for the women concerned.

### **Role of the political parties and of civil society**

The influence of political parties does not appear as important as one would have expected concerning the women/men balance. Admittedly, the assumption that the left parties are generally more favourable to an egalitarian view was largely confirmed in our investigation – especially when federations or groups of women inside the parties have fought to give more space to women in politics – while liberal parties advocate a more individualistic view linked to formal equality and the Christian democrats focus more on the traditional role of women. In the countries of Northern Europe, the mechanisms of quotas in favour of women introduced by the formations of the left and the ecologists have tended to spread in all parties, whatever their political colour. The process of feminization could even become a major political issue, as in the case of Sweden. In less ‘advanced’ countries concerning the representation of women, such as France, Italy or Portugal, the orientation of left political parties is much more progressive in terms of discourse. However, the left/right divisions are not as clear in terms of guidelines adopted.

Indeed, in the various cities of the seven countries, we observed a great diversity – whatever the party in power locally – both as to the place of women in municipalities, particularly in key positions (mayor, executive, administrative directions) and about the policies undertaken (of feminist or family type). While the left-wing parties declared themselves more concerned with gender equality than the right-wing ones, their actions in practice did not always confirm this. This may be partly explained by the fact that left-wing parties often have a lesser influence on the local level than on the national level. But this is still more so because the issue of gender equality, more than other issues in politics, refers to a cultural dimension on which individual points of view, and especially individual practices often prevail on the party guidelines. Hence the relatively low correlation between the more progressive discourses of left-wing parties vis-à-vis the issue of gender equality and the integration of that dimension in local policies, where the left is in power.

As for the influence of civil society in the balance of power at local level, we have not gathered enough evidence to suggest that greater involvement of associations in the conduct of local affairs induced more attention to the issue of gender in municipal policies. The increased participation of citizens at local level often implies a lower weight of political parties, and such a process is usually favourable to women. In France, the gradual disappearance of the figure of the elected councillor as a local notable and the parallel trend of mistrust vis-à-vis political parties has had an impact that has facilitated the acceptance of the idea of parity. And many women elected in 2001 at the first election in which the lists of candidates had to include as many candidates of each sex (at least in a part of commons), came from the associative sphere and embodied a certain closeness to the people. In Finland, they are often women-friendly cities, such as Oulu, that have

developed democratic policies of some importance. In Sweden, too, there is a link between the desire to strengthen local democracy through various means – proximity policies, citizen initiatives, meetings open to the public – and the decision to develop policies promoting gender equality. The links with civil society and a better representation of citizens at local level appear as assets for the entry of women into politics. In Italy, for example, the proximity policy intends to promote knowledge and skills of women. In certain towns, women's associations (volunteers in most cases) deal directly with schools, hospitals or manage policies of the time-table – all areas deemed as ‘feminine’.

However, in most cases, the discourse of officials of associations differed little from that of elected officials as to the emphasis on the issue of gender, and very few of these activists had questioned the allocation of tasks and responsibilities by gender within their own organization. Taken as a whole, the associative sector did not necessarily appear as a lever in the fight against women's discrimination. The dynamics of associative engagement, often invoked as to the empowerment of women in politics and as to the integration of the gender issue by local authorities, was less clear than many works suggest. According to the observations we made during this survey, only associations that defend openly feminist views and that are broadly recognized at local level played a key role in the changes driven by municipal policies.

If, therefore, greater openness in the functioning of democracy at local level can positively affect women, the actual results in terms of gender equality is difficult to measure. One can nevertheless reasonably assume that when the space allotted to the participation of other actors such as associations is broadened, women's interests are likely to be better represented – not to mention the influence that groups having a feminist perspective can exert.

### **III. Elements favourable to gender equality at local level**

Despite the disparities in socio-economic and cultural realities prevailing in these seven countries, we were able to identify similar processes that promote gender mainstreaming at the local level and that have a cumulative dynamic.

#### **Interest and limits of quota**

Do the laws imposing quotas create a favourable environment for women in politics at the local level? In all countries covered by our research, except for Sweden and Portugal, legislative measures have been taken to increase the number of women in political bodies – whether decision-making or deliberative. But the desire to have a more balanced presence of men and women in public or political life can take varied forms and needs to be evaluated. Depending on the country, these measures do not apply to the same political level, and do not get the same success. They cover only the local level in the case of

Greece, while the French and especially Belgian laws apply to other levels of government, but with sometimes mitigated results. In Finland, the quotas are enforced more or less correctly at national and local level.

The idea, often advanced is that if the proportion of women among elected officials and the administration reaches a certain threshold, they will be able to influence policy in a direction more favourable to equality. This is sometimes or even often true. The visibility of women at the local level creates an environment conducive to the emergence of the issue of equality as people get used to seeing women in important positions, and their presence is gradually assimilated to a social norm. However, the effect is far from being mechanical as it does not automatically lead to real changes in the practices of local authorities. We saw this in France, where the issue of parity has disappeared from public debate when the law was passed, and especially when it came into force in 2001. The elected representatives considered that in voting for it, they had done their duty, but their thinking often stopped at the numerical rebalancing resulting in the municipal assemblies. The distinctions in law enforcement at various levels of power have also helped to limit its scope of the parity principle. When a constraint, such as the invalidation of lists that do not comply with the law applies only at the local level (and even so, in a limited way: only in part of the commons) and does not apply at national level where only financial sanctions against the parties are planned, this can only confuse the message sent by the legislator.

Moreover, the existence or not of accompanying measures and mandatory monitoring of their implementation appears as a vital factor. In Finland, where there is a social and political pressure at national level in favour of gender equality, some towns are slow to acquire the necessary tools to implement the law. The investigation in this country showed that most respondents did not know whether a plan of action (though required by law) was in force in their municipality and, if so, what was its efficiency. In Belgium, where the 1994 Act requires municipalities to conduct an analytical report on the position of women in the political and administrative bodies and to appoint a local official responsible for promoting equal opportunities within the town, the interviews with some officials revealed that they were generally not interested in such a responsibility and even considered it as a poisoned gift when it was added to charges already assigned.

Finally, the problem of resources is essential. The crucial dimension of the budget was highlighted in various countries where the budget of committees in charge of gender equality had declined, which had a negative impact on their functioning – and therefore on their potential action. Thus, if measures of quotas or parity laws appear most often as a prerequisite for the integration of women in politics at the local level, yet they are still not a sufficient condition.

### **Influence of feminist networks**

The presence of feminist associations is most often a lever in the adoption of policies for gender equality. On the one hand, they may promote awareness and train elected women to the issue of gender and equality, and influence ongoing policies. On the other

hand, in countries where the attention to certain social issues has been lessened because of the crisis of the welfare state, women's or feminist groups tend to replace the State on gender issues. They appear as true instruments of empowerment, especially in the political sphere that operates through partisan networks, loyalty networks and very often friendship networks of men. Acting for the promotion of gender equality is an inherent part of the identity of their members. For them, local politics is an arena of constant struggle, in which conflict and power relations between the sexes are very sensitive. Obstacles to the existence of such networks thus exist and are of various kinds. In Greece as in France or Finland, as mentioned above, many elected women fear to be perceived or labelled as feminists and this hampers any attempt to address the issues of equality.

The influence of the feminist movement has its roots in various types of activities: research groups within the university, think-tanks within the municipality, network bearers of training on gender for the elected officials or citizens... The role of these networks is often decisive as the feminization of the decision-making bodies – the examples studied show it – does not guarantee the taking into account of gender inequalities. Therefore, the existence of such groups with a feminist approach within civil society has a major influence in the sense that those who are part of them mobilize a coherent conceptual framework enabling them to legitimize their claims. In Sweden, for example, the theoretical foundations related to gender studies that guide and support the efforts of elected women and men has proved extremely important. In France, in some cities such as Rennes and Toulouse, a reflection on gender equality exists. It is worked out both in universities and institutes in charge of training teachers. And it is strongly supported by networks of feminist associations. In Rennes, in particular, female academic researchers and elected councillors have worked together on the question of the women's competence in politics and obstacles that remain for them. The administration staff also benefited from training courses organized by the Information center for women's rights (CIDF) to learn about their rights.

Whether at national level (such as the French CIDF which are present in each region) or at local level, as in the municipalities of Sintra and Montijo, Portugal, or of Modena, Italy, where centres of information for women were established, such structures may be a tool for equality by hosting women, by sending them to the public services they need and by letting them know their rights. Women's networks play therefore a decisive role in stimulating public action and sustain its effects.

### **Importance of concrete means to support political will**

It was pointed out that a support for women/men equality at the local level is often rooted in the willingness of the mayor. As such, the dynamic examples of gender mainstreaming in towns where the principle of quotas does not apply (Italy and Sweden in particular), show the importance of the political will of local officials. Even in countries considered to be less open to this problematic, some towns took the lead – as in the case of Sintra or Montijo, already mentioned. Even when the mayor is not at the origin of the process, the success of the latter depends on the degree of belief and her/his willingness to

impose it locally. But for doing so, the local authority must have concrete means at its disposal, either through equality policies pursued by the central state that may be supported by concrete applications, or thanks to the possibility of launching specific policies at local level. The responsiveness of the local executive to targets set by the European Commission and the knowledge of tools it offers in this area are also a valuable support in countries where the EU is seen as a synonym for progress and modernity.

It is obvious that a choice in favor of equality between men and women clearly stated by the State and supported by the many channels available to it, create a favourable climate to irrigate the local community and influence the policy developed, and the type of equality in question – formal or concrete – is also important. In Sweden, the institutionalization of equality policies and the work on this subject made by the government have contributed to keeping this issue in the municipal agendas. In Finland, France and Belgium, while the laws on quotas in municipal councils or parity in electoral rolls have significantly increased the proportion of women in municipal bodies, they have pushed to broaden the criteria for recruitment of women and to encourage their presence in the highest municipal functions. Opportunities for women to be part of the arena of ‘real power’ – as mayor, in particular – are improving with their increasing proportion in the councils. The national context, especially with the debates raised by feminists who have demanded that the government implements political reforms, has a driving at local level.

If local authorities can stimulate action in the field of gender equality, however, it appears that the sustainability of these actions is always threatened when they are not supported, as noted above, by the national discourse or favourable cultural and economic environment. Apart from Sweden, where the relevance of the issue of equality seems firmly entrenched, vigilance is the rule, and keeping this issue on the agenda often needs a great obstinacy. The personality of the mayor, the tendency of the local political system to emphasize the partisan fight (which very rarely takes the issue of gender inequality into consideration), the weakness of equality committees within the municipality: all these elements concur in making the gender issue as a secondary topic, that is very rarely taken into account in the long run. Any move in order to institutionalize the gender issue is thus welcome, and it is probably the only solution so that this problem acquires a lasting dimension. The creation of specific functions like delegations on the issue of equality or the drafting of equality plans in municipalities appear as major tools. The fact that a person is charged specifically with this topic is a very important step because local policies do not seem ready to endorse mainstreaming.

As Virginia Sapiro (1998) highlights, it is clear that the real question is not: ‘Do my representatives resemble me?’ but ‘Do my representatives represent my interests?’ We were able to verify the relevance of this finding during our investigation: when egalitarian policies are driven by municipalities, they are almost always carried by female or male elected councillors defending women’s interests or even defining themselves as feminists.

The interaction between the European, national and local levels, between associations and political power, between research and elected officials creates a favourable environment for the development of such measures. But this dynamic appeared as

extremely fragile, and too easily called into question – by a change of political majority, by curbing subsidies, by a disinterest on the part of elected officials who do not consider gender as a legitimate issue. Thus one should emphasize that the integration of gender equality in public policy is not done spontaneously, far away. Only a genuine political will and real efforts to promote this objective can advance the issue. While the Nordic countries are often presented as the most advanced stage of an evolution to which other European countries tend gradually and naturally, our investigation has shown that things are not so simple and improving the status of women by taking into account of equality in public policies in the long run is usually the result of a fierce struggle – and a struggle never won as is shown through the results of recent local elections in a country like Great-Britain where real progress had been made some time before (CFWD 2009).

To overcome the obstacles, true structures of equal opportunities should be created, and probably imposed at the local level. Women's networks in this regard can serve as leverage in fostering solidarity and strategic alliances between women that promote egalitarian dynamic. Such an approach is needed to counter the resistance of political parties, which tend to set other priorities than the fight against gender inequalities. Other studies

## Conclusion

The results of this research are obviously anything but unambiguous. Therefore it cannot be question of offering a reductive picture of the observed phenomena. Yet there are many similarities, including where we did not expect them. The emphasis on the public interest when we talk about inequality, blindness vis-à-vis the very real problems posed by discrimination against women, together with the exacerbation of differences presented as 'natural' and ascribed to their role as mothers: all these attitudes far outweigh the opposite point of view admitting the existence of gender inequalities and considering ways to overcome them. And in these cases, the political will of decision makers appears to be the primary factor of changes. When the dominant feeling is that the gender issue is a false problem, when the discourse outweighs the supposed neutrality of politics, the increased presence of women in elected bodies does not allow in itself to influence the trends of the municipality.

Sweden, it is true, appears quite systematically as a special case, both from the ideological point of view – the *idea* of equality has penetrated the social relations much more deeply than elsewhere, it is becoming a norm – and in terms of the material treatment of inequalities in everyday life (the two are indeed closely related, the first resulting in big part of the second). This can be seen in the extent of changes made in the political representation as well as in law or in practice. While it is true that there are grey areas (appeared in the survey on the issue of violence within the private sphere, in particular) and if there is no question of drawing idyllic picture of the situation in this country, it nevertheless seems that a true dynamics is engaged, not only in the position of women in



politics at the national and local level, but in the attention given to gender throughout the social sphere – and at least partially, in the private sphere.

Finland, however – and for many of us, it was a surprise – presents a much more heterogeneous picture. The significant steps forward noted since a long time as to the presence of both sexes in the political arena or as to measures of affirmative action to enable women to take their place in positions of responsibility do go hand in hand with changes in local politics that are often at their expense – whether for reasons at first sight unrelated to gender relations (emphasis on efficiency requirements in municipal management, privatization of formerly state services; emergence of informal structures of power) or because the spirits are labelled by very traditional representations of the roles assigned to either sex.

In the five other countries, beyond the variations that can not be minimized and that are reflected in quite different rates of feminization of elected bodies (one cannot equate the integration of women in local parliaments in Belgium or France with the situation in Greece, for example), the dominant feeling is that we are still at the very beginning of the way in changing attitudes and practices regarding how to consider the relations between men and women in public sphere. This is reflected both in the repeated questions on 'skills' of women, on their capacity to take on decision-making positions in politics (the question is never raised about men); in the inclination to talk about complementary dimension rather than of equality in what regards women; in the propensity to refer to the figure of the mother and to relate to the latter in any reflection on ways to fight against inequalities of status; and in shifts that, deliberately or not, confuse specific needs related to different stories and experiences with 'natural' differences referring to the biological body.

What this research clearly showed is the scale of transformations which must still be operated in most countries on which attention was focused, to change the sex ratio at the municipal level and so that the gender issue be integrated into the reflections on the functioning of local democracy. The *Guide to the integration of gender equality in local government policies* (Gaspard, Heinen 2004) that was written in parallel with the research report highlights the most innovative examples spotted along the way. But it should not mislead about the extent of such practices: they concern a very small proportion of the towns studied. Nevertheless, it is hoped that, along with other studies that will support or refute our own observations, the joint contributions of this research report and the *Guide* will help broaden the debate on policies which may reinforce the egalitarian process.

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