

Women's Participation and representation around Europe – March 2008

International Women's Day celebrated on 8th March is the occasion to highlight that the fight against men/women equality is far from being over. However with regard to the European Parliament we can see that progress is being made in terms of parity : 17% of women elected in 1979, now their number has risen to 31% which represents the double of the average of national parliaments in the world. The Netherlands with 52% of women MPs takes the lead amongst the EU Member States. This is followed by Estonia and Luxembourg (50%) each. At the bottom of the league lie Malta and Cyprus where there are no women MEPs. In addition to this women MPs in the European Parliament have reached positions of responsibility. Hence there are 4 women Commission Presidents out of 23 and five women Vice-Presidents in the European Parliament (out of a possible 14). Finally since 1979 two women have been Presidents of the European Parliament: Simone Veil (1979-1982 and Nicole Fontaine (1999-2002).

A Commission report published on 6th March shows that despite recent progress, women in Europe are still shut out of top posts in both politics and business. Across the EU, 24% of parliamentarians are women – up from 16% a decade ago – with a similar proportion holding ministerial office. The central banks of all 27 EU Member States are led by a male governor. The under-representation of women at the top level is heightened in big business where men account for nearly 90% of the board members in leading companies, a figure which has barely improved in recent years. External to the Union Norway stands out since it has made it compulsory under the threat of prosecution to have parity within administrative boards (40% of women minimum). Women's participation in the latter has risen by 34% in recent time.