



“Socialist International Women”

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The Implementation of Quotas: European Experiences

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Socialist International Women (SIW) is an international organization that represents the women’s organizations of the socialist, social-democratic and labour parties affiliated to the Socialist International (SI). The objectives of the SIW are: to strengthen relations between its members; to encourage action programmes to overcome any discrimination in society, including any inequality between men and women, and to work for human rights in general, as well as development and peace; to promote understanding among women of the aims of democratic socialism; and to facilitate relations between its members and other socialist-oriented women’s groups that are not part of the SIW, but which desire cooperation.

Socialist International Women is a non-governmental organization (NGO) that enjoys consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council and at the Council of Europe. This case study provides an overview of SIW and its position regarding quotas for women in political parties.

Background to SIW

The SIW dates back to 1907, when 58 delegates from European and other countries met at the first International Socialist Women’s Conference in Stuttgart, Germany, and decided to establish an international secretariat. (Clara Zetkin was appointed Secretary). The conference adopted a resolution on the enfranchisement of women, which was to become the starting point for an untiring struggle for women’s political rights.

The second conference, which took place in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1910, adopted a resolution to set one day a year aside as International Women’s Day and on that day to agitate for women’s suffrage and the political emancipation of women.

The women’s movement was restructured after the end of the First World War in 1918. The organization was quite active until the start of the Second World War in 1939. In 1955, the International Council of Social Democratic Women was founded, following a series of international women’s conferences demanding the re-launch of the movement. The name of the organization was changed to Socialist International Women in 1978.

Since 1978, the SIW has promoted women's rights effectively, focussing on the political, economic and social empowerment of women. As the organization of socialist, social-democratic and labour women's organizations, the SIW has been especially involved in the internal democratization of these parties, pressing for the adoption of the gender quota system as a temporary special measure to ensure higher representation of women, both within the memberships of these parties and within their decision-making bodies.

SIW on Gender Quotas

The SIW has concentrated on the incorporation of the gender quota into party statutes and other regulative instruments that govern the internal life of a party. This can be seen in SIW documents and statements that deal with the quota. Two of these documents are:

1. 'Women and Power-Sharing: Leadership and Strategies' SIW Bureau Meeting, 15–16 May 1998, Oslo, Norway

This declaration calls for affirmative action to promote the participation of women in government and party structures.

'From the point of view of socialist, social democratic and labour women, several aspects of gender politics must be addressed in order for women to achieve equality. Measures must be implemented to ensure that women are represented at all levels of government and party structure. Affirmative action must be taken to promote women within these institutions, for example:

- the preparation of more gender-balanced lists of candidates for elections of any kind;
- the assurance of gender-balanced representation in party structures;
- the promotion of women to leadership positions, such as ministries and executive positions in international institutions; [and]
- the close scrutiny of the media to ensure that women's issues are put on the public agenda and that women in public positions are well represented'.

2. 'Implementing a Gender Perspective in Public Policies' SIW Bureau Meeting, 29–30 November 1994, Budapest, Hungary

At this meeting, the SIW Bureau concluded that, 'in order to achieve these objectives it is a necessary precondition to enhance the contribution made by women, increasing their number and guaranteeing their effective presence in decision-making positions, implementing specific measures of affirmative action'. The SIW welcomed plans to achieve equality and the steps that had been taken in this regard in many countries by 1994. Social-democratic and socialist women recognized and supported 'gender mainstreaming' as 'an additional approach to policies of positive action and an instrument not only towards promoting equality but also towards making the female vision of life a fundamental part of governance'.

The SIW called for enhanced cooperation and coordination between different sectors and new political players, including NGOs. It also underlined that governments should establish an internal structure responsible for following up on and appraising the gender dimension of public policies at the national and local levels. This structure must exist within each government department or at the cross-ministerial level. Finally, the SIW urged all of the members of the Socialist International to adopt the proposals set out in 'Implementing a Gender Perspective in Public Policies', strengthening their commitment to a 'future of solidarity incorporating greater equality and fairness between the sexes'.

Three quota models

By adopting declarations, resolutions and recommendations, the SIW has tried to put pressure on SI member parties. The internal democratization of political parties remains open to question, and processes of fair and open dialogue at all levels of the party

organization are closely connected to women's participation in decision-making bodies. There is still much to be done, however, to improve the position of women members of political parties. Not all members have equal access to information, not everybody participates in decision-making and policy-making processes, and many women continue to be excluded from party activities.

Although most social-democratic, socialist and labour parties have incorporated gender quotas into their internal statutes, it is not easy to implement these regulations at all levels. It is also the case, furthermore, that, if the quota is not respected, in most cases, no one can be held to account. (I am not aware of any local party organization being sanctioned for not respecting the quota rule.) There are no strong mechanisms to monitor implementation of the gender quota in everyday political life and it seems that there is no political will to develop such instruments. Today, for the most part, there are only the reports or recommendations that are submitted to local party structures.

One can discern three models of quotas within political parties: (1) some parties have applied the quota rule to candidate lists and not to party structures, (2) some parties have applied the quota rule to party structures only and (3) a small number of parties have applied it to both party structures and candidate lists. When analyzing these three models, it is obvious that the first one and the last one (quota rule for party structures and quota rule for party structure and candidate lists) clearly demonstrate a genuine commitment to the promotion of gender equality, both with respect to party positions and to positions, for example, in local and national councils and in government.

When a party only applies a quota to candidate lists, this commitment to gender-balanced representation may not be connected to its internal values, but rather to a provision of electoral law or to an obligation that has been forced on a country by 'the international community'. This is a common scenario in post-conflict societies, where supranational institutions and mechanisms are engaged in 'establishing the rule of law'. While it is certainly a helpful tool, if political parties are not strongly committed to ensuring gender-balanced representation within their own internal structures, then it is not one that social-democrats are in favour of.

Conclusion

Parties that have incorporated quotas into their statutes—mostly socialist, social-democratic and labour parties—have encouraged other political actors to follow suit, or at least to consider quotas. Progress in promoting temporary special measures like quotas has been made by centre-left and leftist parties throughout the world. All of the three models mentioned above can be found among socialist, social-democratic and labour parties.

The SIW and the SI have been encouraging all of their members to incorporate the quota rule into their statutes. Whether they have chosen to do so has been an important factor in determining their membership status both in the SIW and in the SI.

Although no special steps have been taken to monitor implementation of gender quotas at all levels of political parties, over the past couple of decades, the percentage of women in our parties has increased significantly. Would this have been the case if the quota had not been introduced? Given the negative experiences of those parties that do not support special measures in the same way as socialist, social-democratic and labour parties, we believe that the answer to this question is no. At least, the process to empower women politically would have taken much longer and would have yielded less positive results.

A gender quota grants the under-represented sex the opportunity to make its voice heard. It is a response to the fact that access to decision-making positions is dependent on the political will of those who are more powerful.

Ultimately it comes down to basic rights: the right of any human being to be treated equally. For if one is not given a chance to decide for one's self, what is democracy? For all of these reasons, the promotion and the implementation of gender quotas in the political sphere are still very important tasks for the SIW. We certainly have much more to do.