



Campaigning for Europe

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(5) How women can save Europe 8 November, JDE52

Speakers: Joanna Maycock (Secretary-General of the European Women's Lobby) and Indre Vareikyte (Member of the European Social and Economic Committee)

Moderator: Shirin Wheeler (Head of Unit, European Investment Bank)

The session on "How can women save Europe?" focused on women in power and how campaigners put the issue of gender on their radar to mobilise women and harness this power.

The first point discussed was how women vote. **Joanna Maycock** stressed that in general women in Europe voted less than men did. Indeed, in the last EU elections, women were 4 percent less likely to vote than men. However, up to now, women had been less likely to vote for populist and Eurosceptic parties. The question therefore was how campaigners could succeed in getting people to vote.

Joanna Maycock emphasised the fact that we were celebrating 100 years of women's suffrage. This was therefore an appropriate moment to investigate why women were not voting, why they had stopped voting, and why they did not feel represented. Looking at the example of the United States, it was puzzling to note that 53 percent of white women had voted for President Trump. These women were generally older, married, living in suburbs and rural areas and apparently followed their husbands' opinion and the narrative of their community. This showed that feminists in the US must provide these women with different narratives.

Taking this into account, the European institutions should not just talk to women from the "Brussels bubble", but instead engage in an exchange with every woman, independent of age, race, background or income level. She claimed that there was no such thing as a single "woman's experience".

The second point examined was that of elected women. **Indre Vareikyte** pointed out that only a quarter of the politicians in Europe were women. This showed that a glass ceiling did exist in national institutions and local governments. The best communication tool for empowering women, recruiting them and getting them elected was to have role models that could inspire other women to act and change perceptions in society. **Ms Vareikyte** further stated that it was necessary to address how women were portrayed in the media and reflect what women were capable of achieving. When looking at national contexts, some countries portrayed "good women" as mothers who stay at home looking after the children while their husbands work. This could prevent women from being empowered. **Ms Vareikyte** argued that there was a pressing need for change. It was necessary to show that women could have a family and be successful in their jobs.



According to **Joanna Maycock**, not all political parties had recognised the fact that we needed female leaders. This was why the best way to have more women involved in politics was to have quotas as a temporary measure to change the balance of power. Political parties should also show how they were trying to appeal to women.

The third point raised during the session was whether we needed more women elected or a more feminist political agenda. **Joanna Maycock** stated that both were linked and that we had to be able to convince women that Europe was for them. It had used to be easy to point to European legislation focusing on women's rights, but there had not been anything new for women in the last 10 years as Europe had stopped progressing on gender equality. It was also necessary to have feminist women in power to drive political change.

After these introductory statements, Shirin Wheeler opened the floor to questions and debate. The main conclusions were that there was a need to address the issue of gender equality more at the European level, to encourage women to vote for women by going beyond national feminist bubbles and to inspire them to vote by emphasising the relevance of the European Parliament. Emphasis was also put on the violence faced by women on the internet, which discouraged them from getting involved in politics. Institutions should tackle this issue urgently.

Finally, the two speakers were asked to give three key points they had taken from the discussion.

Ms Maycock started by stating that there was no such thing as democracy if women were not participating in it, that quotas were necessary in order to have more women in power, and that we had to be unapologetic about demanding "Europe to do more for Europe" by showing that it cared about gender equality. **Indre Vareikyte** added that women needed help on dealing with harassment. She argued that it was everyone's job to promote gender equality and move things forward. This also included men.

The final take-away message from the session, put forward by **Shirin Wheeler**, was that we must put women and their rights centre-stage in this campaign and that this should be done unapologetically. It was necessary to harness women's power and creativity via positive stories and relevant local policy. The far-right was targeting women and should not have free rein. Violence and intimidation against women in politics was prevalent and unless EU institutions took a stronger and visible stand, we could not hope to attract more female candidates or reach more female voters.