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ARGUMENTAIRE

Women in French society today

Greater economic, social and political equality

1. FRENCH WOMEN ARE ACTIVELY PARTICIPATING IN ECONOMIC AND SOCIETAL LIFE

French women are participating fully in the labour market. This is hardly surprising since a higher proportion of women than men (28% as against 25% according to Eurostat) have higher education qualifications.

64.1 % of French women work outside the home, 2% more than the EU average. Fewer of them than other European women work part time: in 2006, 30.7% of employed French women were working part time (42.6% of those in Britain and 32.9% of those in the EU-25).

Their employment rate is particularly high between 25 and 54 years of age (80.2% in France, as against an average of 75.5% for the EU-27). Only 29% of 25-54-year-old French women with at least one child under 6 do not work outside the home, as against an average of 35% in the EU-25, showing that, comparatively speaking, French women find it easier to reconcile working and family life. The French fertility rate of 2.0 children per woman, very probably Europe's highest, reflects this situation.

As for the situation of working women, France faces the problem of a gender-based wage differential (according to Eurostat, French women's gross average hourly wage was 12% lower than men's in 2003); nevertheless the gap is still smaller than in other European States (22% in the UK).

Finally, French women are playing a growing role in community life. 40% of them belong to a community association of some kind or other. Of these, 20% hold executive positions in their associations, for the first time exceeding the percentage of men doing so (18%). More men (45%) still belong to an association, but the difference is mainly explained by their greater involvement in sports associations. Moreover, this gap is likely to narrow in that a growing number of women regularly take part in sporting activities (48% in 2000 as against 9% in 1968 and 32.5% in 1997).

2. PROACTIVE PUBLIC POLICIES HAVE ENCOURAGED GREATER EQUALITY

The French public authorities have developed facilities to help reconcile family and working life. In particular, public childcare facilities (crèches, nursery schools) are very developed in France, one of the OECD countries devoting the most public money to them (1.5% of GDP as against 0.8% of GDP in the UK). Moreover, French women enjoy different types of parental leave (16 weeks of paid maternity leave, "parental education leave", etc.) allowing them to devote time to their children whilst knowing that they are guaranteed the right to return to their jobs after a period of time which they themselves have chosen. There are also means-tested benefits during parental leave and benefits to compensate for child-minding expenses for working parents.

Over the past few years, proactive legislation has been passed to combat the discrimination which women encounter in working life. After an Act in 2001 on professional equality for women, the Equal Pay Act was passed in 2006. This is encouraging employers and unions to define and schedule measures to close the wage gap between women and men. In addition, the Act of 30 December 2004 established an independent administrative authority, the High Authority against Discrimination and for Equality, which can assist female victims of discrimination.

3. THE 1999-2000 REFORM HAS HELPED REDRESS THE INEQUALITY OF ACCESS BETWEEN FRENCH WOMEN AND MEN TO THE POLITICAL ARENA

French women won the right to vote only in 1944, i.e. 38 years after those in Finland, and for several decades after that few of them were elected to political office.

Starting in 1999, legislation was passed to end this anomaly:

- the objective of equal access to elective office was incorporated in the Constitution, which has not been done in any other State.
- the Act of 6 June 2006 imposes on political parties an obligation to ensure parity. It compels them to present an equal number of men and women for the regional, municipal, Senate (proportional representation) and European elections and financially penalizes political parties which do not honour the principle of gender parity when appointing candidates for general elections.

This reform has had undeniable results: women today account for 33% of municipal councillors (as against 21.7% before the Act of 6 June 2000), 16.9% of senators (10.9% before the Act) and 47.6% of regional councillors (27.5% before the Act). 43.6% of French MEPs are women, putting France in fourth position in the EU-25.

4. THE MACHINERY TO ENCOURAGE EQUALITY OF POLITICAL REPRESENTATION WAS STRENGTHENED IN 2007

The Act of 6 June 2000 did not resolve all the problems. There are still few women in the French parliament (12.3% of the deputies) and in local councils.

So on 31 January 2007 an Act was passed to achieve parity in these spheres too. The Act increases the financial penalties on parties which do not honour the parity principle for general election candidates and brings in compulsory parity for municipal and regional councils.

Source : Service de presse de l'Ambassade de France à Londres, 2007