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We must stand for gender equality

Contribution to EPP debate on gender equality

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It is a good news that EPP political family in the European Parliament has decided to establish its position on the gender equality. An excellent comprehensive paper has been prepared by Frances Fitzgerald and her team.

I know that some of the colleagues want to see the gender equality replaced by "equality between women and men". I think, however, that we should look at the world in a more generous way, and not as a rule look at men as constant reference point for any discussion on equality. Gender is an inclusive word that we have no reason to be ashamed of.

We have to take the side of women in current situation in Europe. There is a palpable feeling among many that the current populist discourse takes its strength from denigrating of women, degrading them as persons and as political actors.

The fact is that in recent protests, in Poland and in Belarus, women form a core of the prodemocratic force leadership. The populists and autocrats cannot accept it. We should thus clearly state our position. I cannot imagine a modern party, that would not understand and support, without reservation, the increasing role of women in public life as decision makers, also having a right to make decisions about their own life choices, including the sexual and reproductive ones.

I have no doubt that we should urge Member States to sign and ratify the Istanbul Convention. I come from a country, that recently put on the political agenda the withdrawal from that Convention. We should not allow any member state abdicate their responsibility in defending women's rights.

We have to be a strong, uncompromising voice for women, also for political reason. We should defend women' rights and freedoms, especially in places where they are questioned. It is thus our duty to listen to the voices in society and become credible partner in the social dialogue on gender equality and women's rights.

One of the contentious point in the discussion about gender equality has been for awhile the issue of quotas. I would like to say that gender quota is not a dirty word. It does not not diminish our value as professional women. On the contrary, quotas are a clear signal that we see the society as it is and not as an idealized construct, where everybody is nominally equal. Because that is not the case. The quotas are a necessary "balancing act" of making equality between sexes a reality.

No modern political party can put its head in the sand and pretend that the world and the society did not change. If we want to be influential not only among elderly people, but have a broader appeal we have to respond to concerns especially of young women. They are the future, and they do not see the world in rigidly ideological terms, as some people in conservative parties tend to do.

The society needs a deep renovation of its fundamentals, and we also do, as its political representation, especially here, in the European Parliament. We should avoid presenting a retrograde views on the gender equality, for if we stay in our closed boxes, nobody would be listening to us anymore.

Now we should do our utmost to garner the widespread support for paper's proposals for action. Among the ones that are especially important from my perspective is a strong emphasis on equality as a core value for Europe. We cannot compromise on this one bit.

Here we stand and can do no other, to quote Martin Luther.