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“Gender equality and Leadership: Still so many stones to overturn”

Inclusive Leadership: A Curriculum for Politicians Round Table organized by

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I would like to commend the initiative. It is true that we live in transformative times in all areas of human activity. Each of us here most likely has a long private list of deep changes that are already with us or soon to come that bringing challenges to leadership at all levels of governance.

I would talk about the need of leadership smart enough to prepare our economy for years of the economy of shortage, with a good balance between systemic and infrastructure adjustments. About leadership ready to face Russia’s brutal efforts to create a new political order on European continent. About leadership able to design and implement a good strategy protecting our values and interests. About leadership that would say: Yes, we have reached the carbon peak and must ensure that the economy of shortage will not distort our direction of change. However, I would also care about a leadership capable to win the race between democracies and authoritarian regimes.

A common characteristic of all those transformation is that they are not silo-like developments. They all exhibit various modes of interdependencies and interlocking influences. This is why it is so important to look at the issue holistically so we are able to connect the dots. For this, we need an inclusive leadership. There are studies and books proving that women cope better for many reasons with this type of challenges and can make leadership more effective. And I think we should not feel obliged anymore to prove that an inclusive leadership is a better leadership. A burden of proof

should be on those who think the opposite, and would be happy with continuation of exclusive leadership.

I think that this Inclusive Leadership Initiative offers a chance to shake the current reality of inequality in the leadership. I could not agree more with your assumption that the lack of equality in political representation is not due to the lack of leadership skills of some, especially women and those with an ethnic minority background. It would seem like a banal truth, but it still needs repeating. Indeed, our social life has a tendency to reproduce some backward concepts on how we organize our societies. This thought structure has been embedded in our societies for so long that it is often the organizations' default posture.

As for the proposed Curriculum itself, I find it to be well thought-out. Its training modules seem to me like a building block system, which allows to accumulate knowledge as the course advances. The additional value here is the experiential, practical form of interactions. I like that the practical exercises are based on some real events – like the famous “Sofagate”. The thought re-enactment to find a solution re-establishing gender equality in such a high-level setting can be really eye opening. It will force male leaders to think about their unconscious biases.

It also appeals to me that the target of the training are “gate keepers”. That is active politicians who support gender and ethnic minority equality verbally or in their policies, generally beyond the lip service. Even parties with the most liberal policies and that have such programs for equality for their leadership are faced with mental barriers among their rank-and-file membership. This training is action-oriented with the goal of advancing equality within political parties. Thus this transition to transformational and inclusive leadership has a potential to affect a far-reaching political change, not only for women and ethnic minorities, but also for societies-at-large.

The one point of disagreement I have – not related with the training curriculum in itself, but with the introductory text where the authors write that: “We rather argue that features that are associated with concepts of political leadership and authoritativeness are based on traits typically ascribed to a traditional and “western”

conception of power, and that political parties reproduce these norms while recruiting their own leadership and personnel.” My point here would be that this is not a specifically “western” habit. In China conception of power seems also resistant to gender and especially ethnic minorities equality. In Africa, we can also witness similar tendencies. I would thus say that this is unfortunately a universal feature of the conception of power. However, it is not a consolation.

You are asking me about the attitudes in European political families to the equality. The family I know best is very much embedded „on the ground”, often church influenced, in many instances, rooted in conservative cultural background of the local communities, where the party is strongest. In my view the Inclusive Leadership program, in this particular context, might be useful also to female members. This, of course, would not take the male members of the hook. The change needed is happening across the board rather slowly. Thus, in this case, the strategy for engagement should, concentrate on exposing the cultural factors within the DNA of the party. This might be difficult for those for politicians who are comfortable with the situation as it is.

I see around me women that are doing excellent job, they are creative, accountable, dedicated. Even appreciated until the moment when a leader is to be elected. And then those elected are nearly as a rule male candidates, women are far too often not seen fit for leadership. It is dramatically frustrated to hear that women are not elected or promoted in their jobs because there are no women that would meet criteria for leadership. This fake news must be stopped. Fortunately, there are great role models, women leaders in Christian Democratic European current. However, these are still exceptional situations today but might mean the beginning of a change.

Stereotypes strongly rooted in the traditional past slow down the progress. We should be ambitious when it comes to the timeline for gender equality related action and benchmarks for achievements in this field. I hope that pandemic that hit women’s life, in particular through labour market, will also accelerate reactions. We believe that recovery should be deeply and visibly women inclusive. When you look at European leadership of decision-making bodies, we have never had so many women involved. This is actually very sad that we need women in leadership to

make us hope that there will be progress. It is true that far too often gender equality is still a lip service. The propensity to elect female leaders is not sufficient. Still so many stones to overturn. I trust that pandemic is a moment that can help mobilize those colleagues who have not yet opened their eyes to gender unfairness. As I was saying before, it is about not reflecting enough about the issue of representation in politics, still the remnants of the idea that women should be more “deserving” than men to get some important function.

A general pivot is still a challenge.

Thank you for your kind attention