

PARALLEL SESSIONS

PANEL: THE FEMALE POLITICAL CAREER

Speech by Pia Locatelli

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If we look at the countries where women have joined at least one third of seats in Parliament, we learn that there are three common elements:

- Quotas for women,
- An electoral system with proportional representation,
- Specific measures during the electoral campaign, like access to media, campaign spending etc.

The three winning factors have to be considered in defining strategies for the empowerment of women, but also other elements, that is: obstacles) have to be kept in mind.

Even if each country is unique, there are some additional barriers which are common to most, not to say all, women. I will list ten of them but the list may be longer:

- insufficient time for activity outside household, because of domestic work and domestic plus remunerated work;
- inadequate understanding within family, mainly by male partners, for social activism;
- self-perception of women as unfit for politics;
- lack of financial resources;
- lack of self esteem;

- arrogant, ignorant or offensive attitude of the media towards women in politics;
- corrupt politics, which is bad in itself but also it has contributed to create skepticism towards the possibility for individual action to change the situation;
- a basic misunderstanding of the idea of gender equality;
- unclear rules on the selection of candidates which reinforce male domination;
- the gatekeepers who are almost all men, of a certain age, very often with a traditional gender-role vision.

The list could go on.

Adding some reflections on my personal experience, personal difficulties or obstacles which I had to address, often with some uneasiness for myself even to identify or recognize them.

Loyalty to gender i.e. gender solidarity. Women always support women?

I have done my best in all situations because I wanted to “promote myself”; at the same time, I have always felt committed to promoting other women. I thought it was reciprocal but in some cases, it was a mistaken assumption and I paid for it, which hurt me deeply as well as leading to defeat. For example when I was a candidate to lead my (small) party, I did not have the support I expected from the women of the party. I had taken their support for granted and I thought I deserved it.

I tried to understand and one possible explanation is the following:

In my work I have often found myself in the position of having to choose in terms of priority and loyalty: who or what to give priority to, in the case of a conflict situation. Above all and more and more often, I had to choose between my loyalty to the cause of women or to my party, within the party loyalty to my group, my local organisation. In the case of my candidacy to lead the party, loyalty to the political faction within the party came first for most women members of my party.

Relations among women: we women feel obliged to speak always positively of ourselves and in this way we deny problems which, if not faced, risk compromising not only relations, but even the effectiveness of our actions. We must have the courage to admit the difficulties that sometimes are present in relations among women. The topic of envy, of betrayal, true or alleged, among women is real and we must face it. The conviction, widely-held in Italy, that women do not cooperate to achieve a common goal, which happens more in countries where the women's political movement is weak, has to reckon with feelings such as envy, in addition to lack of experience.

The stereotype of envious women conceals the fact that women have been "obliged" to be envious by a patriarchal culture. Women are/may be envious not because of a presumed revengeful, poisonous female nature, but because they have been suffering for a long time from an undeserved and unjust status of marginality and impotence. Their reaction to all this can even show different manifestations of envy. The usual "why her and not me" must be overcome, putting together "she" and "I" in a common path of

unifying forces which cannot but be synergetic. Men are able to keep together because they have **a long experience of exercising power**. We still have to learn, but it depends on us, because we cannot expect or hope that a monopolist (men in this case) will voluntarily break his monopoly.

The relationship with power: this is another thorny problem that most women, not all of them, of us, to tell the truth, have not been able to solve, since power is perceived as a sort of black hole that raises diffidence, fear, that makes you keep your distance, reluctant to get involved. Power is a concept full of different connotations, more negative than positive, and it deserves serious and deep consideration. I wonder, for instance, whether the choice to speak not directly or explicitly of power, (but of decision-making positions) is a confirmation of the not always serene relationship that women have with power. It is much more "elegant", or less embarrassing I would say, to claim access to a "decision-making position" than to claim "power".

This leads me to suggest that there is a great misunderstanding, which comes from how power is often used, mainly by men. In prevailing behaviours, the dominant aspect of power is that it rules out the power of others (what you gain, I lose), neglecting the emancipating aspect which may grow and expand synergetically among different subjects at the same time.

Power is the ability to generate necessary activities, to mobilize resources, to obtain and make use of what is indispensable in order to reach the objectives that a person, a group, a party have in

mind.

I believe that the world would be very different if power were equally split between men and women.