

Oslo, 19 November 1991

Prime Minister
Gro Harlem Brundtland

WOMEN IN POLITICS -- PARTICIPATION, POWER AND RESULTS

It is a great pleasure for me to be here with you today. When we took the initiative for this conference last year, we were in the beginning of a peaceful revolution in Europe. These events have radically changed the political map of Europe. They will go down in history as belonging to the gigantic changes of this century.

It would be daring of me to come to talk about life under totalitarian rule, about the absurdity of totalitarian rule and the grave violation of human rights that kept the system alive.

Now that The East/West conflict is over, now that people are free to speak their mind, we can have the dialogue between us which we were deprived of for decades. Now, at last, common European problems can be dealt with in a geographical framework that makes sense.

European nations have become linked together in a common destiny. With democracy also gaining ground where its roots are anchored on the thinnest soil, we can have a vision of Europe regaining its rightful role in the world. Democracy is no recent phase of human history. It is human history. And human history is being made now.

People who have been deprived of democracy probably know a lot more about its importance and significance than those who sometimes seem to have become all too used to having it. The "old" democracies have an important lesson to learn from the democratic revolutions in Eastern and Central Europe: Freedom, democracy and human rights are values that cannot be taken for granted. They must be fought for. And, they are worth fighting for.

The unveiled ecological crisis in former totalitarian states show too clearly what can happen when governments exempt themselves from public criticism. People must have a right to information about activities which affect their life conditions, not least environment and health issues. People must have real opportunities to participate in democratic decision-making and to speak up when their interests are trespassed upon. Partnership, participation and pressure from the people are the requisites of change and for sustainable development

Therefore, it is so vital that people use their democratic

freedoms. We should not let apathy gain ground. We should not by indecision or contempt for prevailing circumstances let others make decisions for us. An active and informed population is the best line of defence against financial power play and shady decision. Democratic forms of government cannot function if people abstain from using their political rights. So I say; take care of our common interests. Don't be sure that others will do it for you.

Democracy is not achieved once and for all. Democracy is a never-ending process. In this process, we must learn again and again how to strike the right balance between the search for the common good and the rights and the freedom of the individual; between the principle of majority rule and the respect for the rights of the minorities; between the need for efficient decision-making and the need for broad and effective participation in the decision-making process.

Freedom, the rule of law and human rights cannot be taken for granted. As democracies mature and develop, some problems may be done away with, but new ones arise. There is no such thing as a perfect democracy. We must all be willing to subject our democratic systems to the critical scrutiny of ourselves and our partners.

Women must play an active part in this process, both nationally and internationally. We ourselves must be in the frontline of shaping our societies.

I will now turn to certain aspects of our Norwegian experience. Women in Norway were early in acquiring certain fundamental civil and political rights which for a long time had been exclusively the domain of men. However, the most fundamental changes in womens life in Norway took place in the 1970s and 1980s when women made their entry on a grand scale into the workforce, community affairs and politics. This coincided with the emergence of the new women's movement in the USA and Western Europe.

I am saying this to emphasize that although Norwegian women nowadays have rights and opportunities which are still denied women in many other parts of the world, it has taken a great deal of time and effort to get this far. It is also important that Norwegian women have had access to use free, democratic channels to pursue their demands.

The Norwegian Government which was appointed in 1986 comprised eight women and ten men. It would be an understatement to say that this attracted a good deal of international curiosity at the time. However, it was no coincidence that Norway was the first country in the world to have what some observers called a "women's government". This was a result of the strong position achieved by Norwegian women, both in politics and in society generally, and of the struggle and untiring efforts of many women and women's organizations to achieve real equal rights.

Norwegian women began to struggle for the right to vote in the 1880s, working both through women's rights organizations and through political parties. They achieved their goal in 1913. The first woman had taken her seat in the national assembly as early as 1911, although only as a deputy. In 1945 the first woman minister was appointed, but it was not until the 1970s that the number of women in the Government rose to three.

It is clear that if women are to influence the course of social development and participate in the shaping of tomorrow's society, they must participate in decision-making bodies at all levels. They must be elected to democratic bodies in local, national and international fora in order to have a say in the decisions made there. They must take part in negotiating delegations and serve on committees. And they must be represented in the bodies that prepare issues for decisions and draw up general guidelines -- and preferably men and women should be about equally represented in such decision-shaping and decision-making.

Both actual experience and modern research into women's affairs show that as long as only a few women are involved, they will not be able to put enough weight behind their attitudes, values and views. Researchers in the field of women's studies call this the "hostage role". A woman who is alone or one of very few women in a committee otherwise comprised of men is likely to find herself in one of two situations: either she may be regarded as a singleminded, expressing a minority view which a majority of men will tend to neglect, or she is influenced by the majority views and gradually gives up arguing her own opinion. These are phenomena which apply not only to relations between women and men, but also to other relations between the few and the many.

It is on the basis of these kinds of experiences that Norway and other Nordic countries have introduced quota systems as a means of including more women in politics and other important sectors of society. A quota system is also a general tool which Norway has used for many years to ensure that sparsely populated districts and various geographical interests are heard.

We see now a growing interest in quota systems among women in various international and national fora in Europe. They seem to be attracted by the situation in Norway and the other Nordic countries and note the high proportion of women in politics and public life.

A quota system has proved to be an effective way for us to encourage the participation of women. There are clear differences between the proportion of women in political and public life, where quotas have been applied, and in the private sector, which is not regulated in this way.

However, we must not overlook the fact that the quota system has been, and continues to be, a controversial tool. It was not until the issue of quotas for women was raised that the dispute over the use of quotas really came to a head. Quotas had previously been introduced for other interest groups without being incorporated into Norwegian law, but a legal basis was found necessary to ensure the use of quotas based on gender.

In 1981, the Equal Status Act was amended to include a provision on the representation of both sexes in all official committees, governing boards, councils, etc. A subsequent amendment stipulated that the proportion of the either sex had to be at least 40 per cent. Several of the political parties have introduced similar provisions which apply to their own party organs. However, there are no corresponding provisions applicable to private business or industry.

The legal provisions do not apply to bodies elected by general election. Nevertheless, the quota rules introduced by the individual parties have already resulted in a high proportion of women in such bodies. In Norway, Sweden and Finland, the proportion of women is between 35 and 40 per cent, whereas it is 26 per cent in the Netherlands, 23 per cent in Switzerland, 7 per cent in Great Britain and 6 per cent in France.

However, these accomplishments are not immune to set-backs. This was illustrated by the local elections in Norway this autumn, in which the proportion of women in local political organs fell from 31 to 28 per cent. The voters seems to have used the right to delete candidates from the ballots, and more women than men were deleted.

This is an important message. Both democracy and equal status -- which is in fact nothing other than equal rights and thus an integral part of democracy -- must have the support of the general population. Throughout history, we have seen that it is not enough to incorporate democratic rights into law. They must be exercised and safeguarded in a manner which is likely to gain general public support and which is seen and accepted as legitimate and just.

We must take advantage of the democratic rights we have won, and at the same time encourage women to take part in the democratic process and to exercise their influence in democratic bodies. The old saying that knowledge is power applies to this area as well. We must also ensure that the working conditions for women who are elected to such bodies are such that they are able to perform their duties on the same footing as men.

Our experience is that it can be difficult for women to hold political positions over time because most of them perform their political duties in addition to their ordinary work, and because most women still have the primary responsibility for the family and the home. Our women's movement is particularly

concerned about this, on how we can encourage more women to enter politics and on what it will require to allow them to stay in politics.

Why is it so important that women take part in politics and in decision-making bodies at all levels? In order to achieve results, women must have power, and we can only gain power by participating. Power is often defined as the ability to make one's influence felt in the face of opposition. And women's influence on the actual decision is what really will make a difference.

I believe that all women, regardless of country of origin or background, feel that there are some matters in which we take a greater interest than men. This is related to our role as women and mothers, and our closeness to new life and to future generations. It is also related to the fact that in virtually every part of the world, the day-to-day activities of the family are mainly the responsibility of women.

We have seen that women all over the world share a wide range of common interests. This has been made particularly clear by the women's conferences of the United Nations. We have seen how important it is to make sure that women's issues are included on the political agenda, both nationally and internationally. It is equally important that women have a say in the major, vital issues which concern our common future -- peace, security, disarmament, planning of society, the environment and sustainable development. It is here that we must join forces if we are to achieve results.

In Norway, the three most important issues on the platform of the social democratic party and the current government are employment, the environment and children. I am convinced that these priorities are strongly influenced by women in Norwegian politics.

When the conditions of children are now considered a top priority issues, and when the shared responsibility for our environment is taken so deeply seriously, this is largely due to women's participation and efforts in issues they feel to be important, in the parties, in local democratic bodies, in Parliament and in the Government.

Since the early 1970s there has been a major evolution with regard to Norwegian women's participation in the labour force. 40 per cent of our women were working outside their home in 1970. Today that ratio has increased to 70 per cent and even 80 per cent among the youngest age groups.

Viewed in a longer historical perspective, the rapid, large-scale transition from the home to paid employment was one of the most important, if not the most important change in our society in the post-war years. We have not yet succeeded in adapting welfare benefits to this change. This will be one of the most important tasks facing us in the 1990s.

We have already embarked upon this task, primarily through our broad-based efforts to improve conditions for children and young people. We are beginning to see the results of participation by women in various sectors, in political priorities, in legislation which has a bearing on women's and children's rights, and in the contours of our welfare society.

The Equal Status Act, which provided for a separate Equal Status Ombud and an Equal Status Appeals Board, came into force in 1979 after much political controversy. The establishment of another position, the Ombud for Children, was also highly controversial. The latter is an independent institution designed to safeguard the interests of children in society, and was unique when it was established in 1981. These Acts and positions have provided us with a means of safeguarding the rights of women and children.

However, legislation alone cannot ensure that developments follow the desired course in the future. The many major and minor decisions made in the course of the political process are just as important.

For example, since 1987, we have introduced separate programmes of action for promoting equal status in all the various ministries, ranging from the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Fisheries, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education. The purpose of these programmes has been twofold: to encourage more women to take jobs in the public sector, and to ensure that equal status is incorporated into all political and specialist fields. We are now beginning to see the results.

Budget policy is another important area. Budgets represent a great deal of power, and the distribution of public funds involves making difficult decisions. The women's movements within the political parties have been particularly active in promoting many of the health and welfare benefits we enjoy today, such as child allowance, maternity leave, kindergartens, and pension rights for women working in the home.

We know how important it is to safeguard the interests of women and children in the daily political process, it is just as important, as I mentioned earlier, that women participate and have a say in major international decisions. At a time when decisions are being made in international and supranational fora as well as within in the nation state, it is essential that women get actively involved wherever decisions are taken.

We can look to a future where the women in Europe will come closer to each other. Following a period of transition that can be painful we can have a vision of 700 million people in Europe alone enjoying democracy and common economic conditions. The lion's share of the efforts to make this

transition must be provided by the countries in transition themselves. However, we in the West must be prepared to become more involved.

We in the West must assist in generating new optimism in the former communist countries. It is in our own self interest to narrow the gaps between us. But we must also have a common vision which goes beyond Europe. As Europeans we have global responsibilities. As European women we have responsibilities to assist those women in the third world which are less fortunate than we are.

Through technological and scientific advances, we have created a world of wealth - for some. But we have also created a world of poverty and inequality - for most of the world's population. And the majority of the poor are women.

Through mismanagement and overexploitation of our natural resources, we have brought life on earth ever closer to the brink of extinction. Women in developing countries are among those suffering most from the deterioration of the environment.

Although there are economic, social and cultural differences between women in different parts of the world, many of the challenges facing women are universal.

Women have a child-bearing role and - in many societies - an almost total responsibility for family care. But a lot of women are not in control of their reproductive lives.

The number of households headed by women is increasing all over the world, but many women do not have the power to make priorities in production and trade. Their access to land and water has diminished, and they own less than one hundredth of the world's total wealth.

Women provide two thirds of the world's working hours, but they only receive one tenth of the world's total wages, and much of the work women do is not even measured or reflected in official statistics.

Women comprise more than 50 per cent of the world's population and they constitute one third of the world's labour force. But they do not have the political representation and power according to their number and participation in production and economic activities.

Women are the most homebound part of the population, they raise children, they provide for the family, they run the social networks and they do the greater work in the health and social services. They recognize the importance of the environment for the well-being of a society and for the future of their children.

Women's participation is a prerequisite for global change. Not

only because women should have the opportunity to influence and control their own lives and living conditions for their children, their family and themselves. Women's experiences and qualities are also vital in our efforts to alleviate poverty and reduce inequality.

We must be able to bridge the gap between the developing and the industrialized countries, between the poor and the rich. In this process, the participation of women is of vital importance.

I wish you the best of luck in the task before you in your own countries, and look forward to international cooperation with women politicians from both East and West who can join together to shape the society of tomorrow.