

Sofagate is proof: women deserve a seat where it really matters

by Zita Gurmai and Maria Noichl on 18th May 2021

The Council of the EU needs a gender-equality, diversity and anti-discrimination configuration to ensure these themes are a priority on the European political agenda.



Zita Gurmai

That embarrassing protocol incident in Ankara last month ([‘Sofagate’](#)), during a meeting with the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, raised serious concerns for feminists all over Europe. The marginalisation women face every day was writ large—and nobody could deny it.

When the seating arrangements demoted Ursula von der Leyen to a second-class participant, it showed that even women in the highest political positions are not immune to discrimination and disrespect. And it begged the question: if the president of the European Commission faces this, how much worse is it for other women? Who speaks up for them? Who is making sure their voices are heard?



Maria Noichl

Sofagate was a terrible public blunder for the European Union and an important reminder to us all that the fight for gender equality is a constant battle. If the European Council president, Charles Michel, wants to make up for his mistake in Ankara—in failing to stand up

for his colleague—it is not only the EU’s protocol manual that he needs to update: it is the European institutions too.

Disproportionately affected

As progressives have said again and again, the pandemic has [exposed](#) and [aggravated](#) existing gender inequalities. Women are not just working disproportionately on the frontline of this crisis—they are also more likely to be in temporary, part-time and other forms of precarious employment, leaving them especially vulnerable to its economic consequences.

Lockdown measures have affected women disproportionately too. They have [led to a rise](#) in unpaid care work for women and a further deterioration in their [work-life balance](#) and mental health.

At the same time, gender-based violence has increased in many countries and access to fundamental rights has been restricted, particularly for women. For evidence, look again to Ankara and the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention announced in March by Erdoğan, who continually violates human rights and knowingly disrespects European values.

Nor is the rollback of rights confined to Turkey. We are seeing a [backlash](#) against gender equality and LGBTI rights from conservatives and right-wing movements across Europe. If ever there was a time for the EU to pay closer attention to equality and women’s rights, it is now.

Sofagate may have hit the headlines but there are more challenges ahead. Yes, women deserve apologies for being mistreated. But, more than that, women in all their diversity deserve concrete action for equality now—not just words.

Dedicated configuration

That action must come in the form of a formal EU Council configuration dedicated to gender equality, diversity and anti-discrimination. This is the only way we can keep equality at the top of the European agenda. It should not take an incident such as Sofagate to draw high-profile attention to such issues as discrimination, gender inequalities and unequal power structures.

These are not just ‘women’s issues’ either. This is about making sure everyone is treated with respect, valued and able to thrive in society.

The case for an EU Council for gender equality and equality ministers is clear—it is the missing piece of the institutional jigsaw for a more gender-sensitive and equality-focused union. While the European Parliament and the European Commission have respectively enshrined gender equality and equality as a key priority and portfolio, the council still has no exclusive structure in which relevant ministers can meet regularly to prioritise these issues.

This is despite the fact that many EU governments have [ministerial portfolios](#) specifically dedicated to gender equality or equality in the round. While these topics may be discussed in other council configurations—such as in employment, social policy, health and consumer affairs (EPSCO)—they are often downgraded while delegated to ministers with other portfolios.

Formalised commitment

In recent years, some rotating presidencies of the council have held informal meetings for gender-equality and equality ministers. This has been very welcome, but it is not enough. Proper consideration of gender equality should not rely on the goodwill of national governments—especially since many conservative governments in Europe are actively undermining it. These issues deserve a formalised and institutionally enshrined commitment at the European level.

A formal configuration would move us one step closer to guaranteeing a gender-sensitive response to the Covid-19 crisis and provide firm ground for the proper implementation of the [EU Gender Equality Strategy](#) and the realisation of a [Union of Equality](#). It would offer hope that the EU can finally make progress on several important files which have been stuck for far too long in the council—such as the EU's own ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the [women-on-boards directive](#) and the [equal-treatment directive](#).

Earlier this month we [wrote](#) to Michel, calling on him to establish a formal council configuration dedicated to gender equality, diversity and anti-discrimination. We have been campaigning for it for quite a while. The European Parliament had already expressed its support, in a resolution [adopted](#) in December.

Enaction would require only a qualified majority in the European Council and no treaty change. Writing to MEPs ahead of a debate following the incident in Ankara, Michel committed himself to 'actively push forward the EU's gender agenda and women's rights as fundamental EU values'. We just need him to demonstrate leadership and act.

As progressive feminists, we shall keep pushing for the institutional changes needed to move towards a more equal, just and inclusive Europe. We hope others will listen.

Sofagate was a terrible mistake. But a bigger mistake would be to leave unaddressed the inequalities that led to it. Women deserve a seat where it really matters. Gender equality must be put at the heart of the EU Council.

About Zita Gurmai and Maria Noichl

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