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LEADER PERSPECTIVE

High time to address the EU's gender deficit!

EU's 15th Annual Employment Week

By MARGOT WALLSTRÖM



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This week we are celebrating the EU's 15th annual Employment Week, which gives an opportunity for officials and employment representatives to discuss some of the EU's most important employment-related issues, including migration, retirement, youth, diversity and also gender equality. It is a good occasion to learn about best practises and initiatives currently in place in terms of EU employment policy.

In Europe's business sector, women account for 44 per cent of all workers, but only 32 per cent are in top positions. Worse yet, women account for only 10 per cent of the board members of leading companies.

The Norwegian Employers Federation has a project that perhaps we could learn from - Female Future - aimed at educating and recruiting women for posts on

the boards of Norwegian companies. Since 2003, Norway has legislation that the board of companies of a certain size must contain at least 40% women. The Female Future project that has been widely recognised all over the world has so far resulted in a database of 500 women who are ready to take up positions as a board member. The legislation has now been fulfilled - 40% of board members in Norwegian companies are women, a figure that I wish more companies in Europe would live up to.

The issue of women's representation in EU politics and business is particularly timely these days. Next year, there are important employment decisions to be made in the European Institutions.

Women make up half of the population but remain under-represented at the top in European politics. The European Commission's lat-

est report on women and men in decision-making in 2007 shows progress but still less than one in three European Parliament members are women. The European Commission performs slightly better, with 9 female commissioners out of 27 in total. However, in 50 years, there has never been a female Commission President and only two Presidents out of 12 of the European Parliament.

At the national level, the situation varies considerably from one country to another, but the overall parliamentary average is only 23 per cent female. Recently, I urged European heads of states and governments, social partners and civil society to engage in an active campaign to increase the presence of women in top EU positions. My Call for Action was this:

● Increase the women voter turn-out in the European Parliament election in

June 2009

● Increase the presence of women on the lists for the European elections

● Ensure the equal representation of women among the top posts to be appointed next year

I am pleased to see that the European Women's Lobby (EWL) - representing more than 4,000 women's organisations in Europe - have reacted strongly, saying that they will be launching in autumn 2008 a Europe-wide, cross-party campaign, urging all decision-makers, individuals and organisations interested in the promotion of democracy and justice to support this initiative.

I hope this is just the beginning.

Margot Wallström, Vice-President of the European Commission, Chair of the Council of Women World Leaders Ministerial Initiative