

Sabine Lautenschläger: 100 years of women's suffrage - gender equality, freedom and democracy

Speech by Sabine Lautenschläger, Member of the Executive Board of the ECB and Vice-Chair of the Supervisory Board of the European Central Bank, at an event marking the run-up to the centenary of women's suffrage, Berlin, 26 July 2017.

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“What we don't want and what we're not aiming for, never, not even centuries from now, is political emancipation and equality for women.”

Of course, these aren't my words. They were written in 1866 by Adolf Lette, a politician. They are very revealing as Lette was the founder of an association with a very specific objective – to promote the “employment of women”. To a certain extent therefore, Lette was an advocate of gender equality – for that day and age.

His general opposition to gender equality, however, was unsuccessful: next year we are celebrating 100 years of women's suffrage. Giving women the vote was a crucial step towards greater gender equality. For if you cannot vote, you have no political voice and, without that, your concerns cannot be addressed.

But the right to vote was only the first step. It was the first step on a journey which then took place at a rather leisurely pace.

It took until 1949 and Germany's Basic Law, which explicitly stated that women and men were equal. And until 1977 for the legal concept of “stay-at-home” wives to be dropped. Only since then have women been able to go to work without their husband's permission.

Do you find that as shocking as I do? Just think: we are not talking about something back in the mists of time; this is only 40 years ago!

It's a good thing that we are shocked. Because it shows how self-evident gender equality has become for us, especially for young people.

But is it really so self-evident?

There's no doubt that access to education and training no longer depends on gender. In terms of school-leaving qualifications and university degrees, women are even slightly ahead.

It's not until later that things get difficult.

Only after they embark on a career do young women notice that equality does not extend as far as they thought. Although they started out on the same conditions as their male colleagues, they have to overcome higher barriers on their career path.

Often they earn less than their male colleagues even if they are just as qualified. They bump into the famous glass ceiling when they want to forge a career. And, above all, it is they who have to combine family and career – not the men. Usually it's the women who take parental leave, and usually it's the women who take part-time work afterwards and who don't progress so far career-wise as their husbands and colleagues.

My impression is that many women see these matters as personal problems. They are that, of course, but they are more than that. They concern all women and the whole of society. And the situation will only change when we all expand our personal horizons and push for wholesale gender equality.

So my appeal to all young women is: don't take gender equality for granted! Be pro-active! Stand up for your rights and the rights of others! The issue of equality is far from resolved.

And by the way, equality is of course not only a matter for women themselves. Why should it only be an issue for women to combine children and a career? Where are the men, where are the fathers?

I sometimes have the feeling that, despite all the progress, certain traditional roles are entrenched in people's heads. And this applies not only to men but also to us women. We too are receptive to stereotypes. Studies show that women, just like men, unconsciously discriminate according to sex – also in the workplace.

What we need is a change of culture. And the starting point for that is to call into question not only the behaviour of others, but also our own. This is an important step which is often neglected.

So it's up to all of us to ensure greater gender equality. But politicians can help too. For example, they can improve the conditions under which women – or men – combine career and family.

And then there are employment practices. Employers should not only use equality as a recruitment tool; they must also make equality possible in practice. That could be done, for example, with more flexible working hours; employees should have greater freedom to allocate their time. Why not pick up the children from school in the afternoon and then go back to your desk again in the evening? Consider Sweden. There it's good form not to organise meetings after 4 p.m. So we can learn something if we only look around a little.

Gender equality has many facets, and I have touched upon several. Generally speaking, there are three things which, for me, are inseparably linked to this issue:

First, equality doesn't only mean rights. For every right there is an obligation. Therefore, having the same rights means having the same obligations. It's not just about cherry-picking, if I can put it like that. Women who demand complete gender equality must also be ready to take on responsibility.

Second, gender equality doesn't only concern a career-minded elite. It concerns everyone. So it's not just about female quotas for supervisory boards and executive boards. It's not just about gender-neutral phrasing in legal texts. All that is of relatively little benefit to most women. For the majority it must mean more flexible working hours, respectful treatment, appropriate pay, better child care – just to mention a few things.

Third, equality ultimately concerns one thing: freedom. Every individual should live exactly how she or he wants to.

That also means we have to be tolerant of different lifestyles. We have to be tolerant of women (and men) who see being at home with the family as a calling; we have to be tolerant of women who see a career as a calling; and we have to be tolerant of women who claim both for themselves: family and career.

And tolerance isn't the whole story: women with different lifestyles should display solidarity. They should never let themselves make comments like "she's only a housewife" or "she neglected her children for her career".

Despite all this, there's one point we should put on record: basically it's a good sign for us in Germany that, when it comes to gender equality, the discussion is usually, though not always, about careers. It means that in other areas we have evidently come a long way.

To realise that, it's enough just to look at other countries – in Africa, for instance. There are areas where women live in terrible conditions – Adolf Lette would still be a progressive reformer there

today. We must therefore not only look beyond our personal horizons but also beyond our national horizons. From a global perspective, the issue of gender equality has quite a different meaning.

Nevertheless, gender equality is also making progress at a global level. For instance, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report covers the whole world. It measures the gaps in a number of areas, including the economy, education and politics. It reports that, if current trends continue, the global gender gap could be closed in 83 years. Girls born now would be on an equal footing at the end of their lives.

There are, of course, enormous regional differences. The World Economic Forum estimates that in eastern Europe and central Asia it will take almost 150 years to achieve full gender equality; in the Middle East and north Africa almost 130 years. At least by comparison, western Europe is doing quite well: only 61 years. In my view, however, that's not praise – far from it – but rather a reminder to progress more quickly.

We are celebrating 100 years of women's suffrage in Germany next year. It's about equality, but it's also about democracy. For if half the population is economically dependent and not allowed to vote, then there is no democracy. It's all the more alarming if parts of the political spectrum are still – or perhaps again – apparently propagating an image of women that is outdated. Whoever does that is also trying to undermine democracy.

To put it another way, if you fight for equality, you also fight for democracy. Alas, today that seems to be becoming ever more necessary.

Thank you for your attention.