

France, Hollande and the Future of Gender Equality



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François Hollande, who defeated the incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy by a very short margin on May 6th, has now finally settled in his office for the next five years at the Élysée presidential palace. Among the many hopes and concerns that the former First Secretary of the Socialist Party has aroused are: *'Is François Hollande the President of gender equality?'* This question is on everyone's lips, or at least on the lips of those who mobilized throughout the presidential campaigns, prompting discussion on gender equality.

The topic was not universally popular; if it hadn't been for feminists, from the general public as well as within the Socialist party, gender equality probably wouldn't have surfaced at all. Indeed, François Hollande was a late bloomer to the issue: until March, gender equality was not a defining feature of his program. Only once the candidates were confronted by *Osez le Féminisme*^[1] at La Cigalle^[2] (March 7th) to discuss their proposed policies to ensure gender equality did Hollande come out as a feminist. His **proposed 40 measures** cover a broad range of topics. Here are some of the key measures:

- The creation of a Ministry of Women's Rights;
- A gender equality unit in every Department in order to insure the inclusion of a gendered perspective in all policy-making;
- The defence of *parité* (*parité* is the feminist reconceptualization of France's Republican universalism in the sense that it seeks to redraw the boundaries of universality through a symbolic partition of humankind into two sexes (Lépinard, 2007). It doesn't call for quotas for women but for equal representation in politics as a matter of justice);
- Actual enforcement of existing laws regarding inequalities at work;
- Public support of parenthood: development of public service for early childhood, reforming parental leave (shorter, with better pay) and reinforcing paternity leave;
- Challenging sexism in the classroom: fighting gendered stereotypes in manuals, anti-sexism training for professionals, enforcing sexual education legislation;
- Addressing violence against women;
- The protection of sexual and reproductive rights: improving access to contraception, especially for minors, improving access to abortion (services available in each hospital, 100% reimbursement).

His first week in office indicates that Hollande has not forgotten feminists' precious support as he has sent repeated signals that women's rights will be a priority during his presidency and that demands for gender equality are both justified and in dire need of political visibility. The day of his inauguration, Hollande paid tribute to Marie Curie, world-renowned physicist and the first woman to ever receive a Nobel Prize. He then went on to pay tribute to Jules Ferry, ardent defender of *laïcité*^[3] who struggled both for secular education and women's education (Jules Ferry was also a fierce proponent of colonial expansion, which Hollande condemned as "a moral and political fault").



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President Hollande also stayed true to his word by guaranteeing equal representation of both sexes in

his cabinet. France *finally* got its very first parity government ever. Seriously. In 2012. There has been, however, discussion over the sort of ministerial posts women have obtained in Jean-Marc Ayrault's government. Out of 34 ministerial posts, 17 have been attributed to women. Still, most of the top jobs seem to remain out of their reach: inescapably, the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of the Interior continue to be a male prerogative. Only the Ministry of Justice went to a woman, Christiana Taubira. Regrettably, the attribution of ministerial responsibilities follows well-ingrained patterns as women are everlastingly put in charge of traditionally gendered portfolios: Health and Social Affairs, Family, Senior Citizens...etc. Feminists also lamented the almost exclusively masculine composition of the President's and the Prime Minister's own personal staff, but welcomed with open arms the creation of a Ministry for Women's rights whose Minister, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, additionally acts as the government's spokesperson, a dual role that has led some commentators to view her position as Minister for Women's Rights as a part-time job.

Overall, this remains an impressive step forward, one that, I hope, will set the tone for years to come. Talent and competence do not know gender (a fact that seems to **boggle the mind** at the Cannes' movie festival these days) and it is refreshing to see such an obvious and simple truth acknowledged at one of the highest political instances. Parité ought to be the "normal" state of affairs. Let's only hope that normalcy will not be short-lived, parité will not be another smoke screen, and gender equality not another sham. Indeed, there are many reasons why we should refrain from celebrating France's success in achieving gender equality.

Obviously, it is too soon to know how Hollande's presidency will benefit women and their quest for equality, but after a disappointing mandate in this area from his predecessor, expectations are high. However, French feminists' calls for action and ambitious policies will not necessarily meet a favourable public. The upcoming legislative elections will constitute a major hurdle as the Left struggles to gather enough support to implement Hollande's program. Besides, if *parité* guided the new government's composition, no such thing can be said about the National Assembly elections: with 40% of female candidates, compared to 41.6% in 2007, crossing the threshold of 20% elected female representatives is far from guaranteed. Subsequent cabinet reshuffles might also pull apart the parity government. In addition, with a debt worth 85,8% of the GDP, Hollande's expensive promises may provoke public anger if adopted: some will either have to be postponed or set aside. Recently, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem sent an encouraging sign: she announced new legislation on sexual harassment, which was previously repealed by the Constitutional Council because it was deemed too vague, would be put forward before the summer.

[1] [Osez le Féminisme](#) is France's prominent feminist organization, created in 2009 in reaction to the government cuts to Family Planning.

[2] [La Cigalle](#) is a famous auditorium in Paris.

[3] [Laïcité](#) is France's particular form of state secularism, based on the 1905 law separating the church and the state. Core principle of the French Republic, inscribed in its constitution, it prescribes the absence of state involvement in religious affairs as well as the absence of religious involvement in government affairs. In public life, laïcité remains quite controversial with Islam's increasing visibility and the promotion of "positive" laïcité by Nicolas Sarkozy, which recognizes France's Catholic heritage.

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