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Making equality between women and men a reality – the march goes on

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

The European Institute for Gender Equality and its Network of Partners Conference – *Joining Efforts towards Gender Equality 2010-2015*

Vilnius, 22 November 2010

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here with you today at the European Institute for Gender Equality. It is a great moment for me to finally be able to visit the Institute and address this conference.

As you know, the idea for a gender institute goes back to the year 2000 when the European Council recommended setting up a European agency dedicated exclusively to work on equality between women and men.

Here we are in Vilnius after nearly a decade of negotiations and decisions in Brussels getting the Institute to work.

I am convinced that this was a very good choice for many reasons.

First, Lithuania is known for its positive track record in the field of gender equality. Already in the Sixteenth century women's right to inherit and to attend meetings was confirmed on the First Lithuanian Statute which even included a chapter protecting women from violence. Lithuania was already taking the lead when the position of women in most of Europe varied greatly.

In 1905, the Great Parliament of this city of Vilnius included women and acknowledged the principle of equality between women and men. This leadership has continued until today. Just look at the female employment rate: at 60.7% Lithuania's rate is above the EU average and above the targets set for 2010 under the Lisbon Strategy.

Statistics also show that here in Lithuania women reconcile work and family life more harmoniously than in many other countries.

And we should always keep in mind that not many European countries can claim to have a woman as head of State.

Secondly, I am delighted at the choice of Vilnius for the headquarters the Institute for Gender Equality, because I know it will be able to rely on firm support from the Lithuanian Government. This has become obvious in the very first months since the Institute started its work.

The Institute's task is to support the European institutions and the European countries in their efforts to promote gender equality.

It will do this by providing **objective, reliable, comparable information and data** on equality between women and men.

It will also help to raise the visibility of gender equality issues by setting up a documentation centre where the public will be able to consult research, publications, programmes and best practice.

I want Vilnius to become the place for Europe to turn to when expertise in gender issues is needed.

I am looking forward to receiving technical assistance from the Institute. This will allow us to focus on our core competences, in other words on policy-making.

Thanks to the data and statistics it will collect and disseminate, the Institute will help the Commission to take evidence-based policy decisions. This is where I expect the Institute to really make a difference.

I know that the day-to-day management of the Institute is in the very safe hands of Ms Virginija Langbaak and her team. And I have one message: There is still a lot to do as gender inequalities remain significant in Europe.

Today's meeting is an opportunity to present the new Strategy for equality between women and men.

1. Importance of gender equality for the EU

Gender equality is a fundamental right. Equality between women and men is one of the Europe's founding principles. It goes back to 1957 when the principle of equal pay for equal work became part of the Treaty of Rome. The latest adaptation of our Treaties, the Treaty of Lisbon, has reinforced our commitment for gender equality. The most recent examples of the progress made in policy-making are the Directives on self-employed workers and parental leave adopted this year.

In fact, over the past decades, we developed European legislation, we increased financial support and we strengthened Member States' policy coordination in order to translate these political commitments into Europeans' everyday life. The results are visible. Much progress has been made in getting more women into the workforce. The EU average is now close to 60 percent, up from 52% in 1998. The Commission is aiming for a rate of 75 percent for men and women by 2020. It is clear that more women need to be part of the workforce to reach that goal and to get Europe's economic engine moving again. Europe should make better use of women's talents – they are problem solvers and excellent at multi-tasking!

Last September the European Commission adopted a five-year action plan – the Gender Equality Strategy – for promoting equality between men and women.

Let me give you a few examples:

- First, getting more women into company board rooms. At the moment, women represent only one in 10 board members of the largest publicly listed companies in the EU and 3% of the presidents of the board. We should do better. I want to see more women in top decision-making jobs. In March 2011, I will bring together representatives of big European companies in a Summit in Brussels to talk about the issue. As a target, I would like to see 30% of women on company boards. This target should be reached by 2015 and increased to 40% by 2020. How do we get there? I am not a fan of quotas. Instead, I prefer voluntary measures and self regulation. Companies such as Deutsch Telekom are setting a good example. But I am also ready – if necessary and as a last resort – to consider targeted initiatives at EU level to get more women into top jobs in economic decision-making.
- Second, the Commission will work with stakeholders to raise awareness of the fact that women continue to earn an average of nearly 18% less than men across the EU. We will aim to put in place a European Equal Pay Day to be held each year to increase awareness on how much longer women need to work compared to men in order to earn the same amount.
- Third, more effort needs to be made in combating violence against women. There are still too many women victims of violence in the EU today. A recent Eurobarometer shows that one out of four Europeans knows someone who has been a victim of such violence. Next year I will present a comprehensive package on victims of crime and take steps to ensure that the rights of victims are effectively protected.

These are a few of the major points in the gender equality strategy.

We all know that gender equality is an economic growth factor. In addition to being a European fundamental value, gender equality also represents an economic treasure.

Women represent 60% of new university graduates, but their presence is lacking in top jobs and they earn less than men. If the EU wants to overcome the economic crisis on the basis of its best asset – its human resources – it must bet on all European citizens. This includes women. To make this happen we need to tackle stubborn imbalances between men and women. In this context, we cannot afford to waste women's talents.

2. EU and gender equality: a renewed commitment

Our first priority is equal economic independence because it is crucial for women as well as men to be able to make individual choices. The key is first to increase the participation rate for women in the labour market, which is also essential for achieving the 75% employment rate goal of the Europe 2020 Strategy.

But it is not enough to get more women into jobs: there is also the question of the quality of these jobs. 32% of women work part time compared to only 8% of men. This is then reflected in women's lower pensions, and their higher exposure to the risk of poverty.

Also, the difficulty of reconciling professional, family and private life must be given special attention since it is a major reason behind women's relatively low employment rates. I will assess different ways to develop arrangements for family related leave, flexible working hours and more affordable and quality care services.

3. Need for a strong mutual commitment

Effective implementation of the strategy requires the involvement of all the stakeholders in our Member States and their national bodies for gender equality and national statistics offices.

I count on the Institute's work to knock their heads together and engage in a joint venture. The success of the strategy depends on our cooperation and the coordination of our actions.

Both the Commission and the Member States have great expectations for the Institute as it was confirmed by the gender equality ministers at a ministerial meeting in Brussels (26 October). We all want the Institute to become the European Union's centre of excellence in the field of equality between women and men.

Conclusion

Despite great progress, women still lag far behind men in employment rates, wages, non-paid housework, childcare, pensions etc. The challenges remain huge but I am confident that, together, we will improve the situation. We have great ambitions, but looking at the progress we have made so far, and looking around the room today, I can say that we have the means to do it.

To conclude, let me address a last point. The Institute has now been operational for several months already. Only one element was missing, but a very visible one: its logo.

After an extremely difficult choice, the laureate of the competition organised by the Institute this summer – with over 1 600 proposals submitted – the winner has finally been nominated. And this morning we will have the chance to officially discover this new logo.

Thank you.