

**Speech by Valérie Létard, Secretary of State for Solidarity, at
the Equality of Opportunity Summit
Tuesday 30 September 2008**

Ministers,

Director [Mr Van der Pas],

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would first like to thank my colleague from the trio, **Mrs Sabuni, the Swedish Minister for Integration and Gender Equality**, for her speech. It seems to me that this passing of the baton is essential. **Changing practices and mentalities is a job for the long term** and, as Xavier Bertrand said yesterday, it requires team work. The participation of my colleagues, yesterday at the opening session and today in the final panel, shows the commitment to this work in all four corners of Europe.

I would also like to thank **the Commission, represented this morning by Mr Van der Pas**, for its involvement. It has made an enormous contribution to the success of this summit. Precious links have been forged between our teams and yours.

Finally, I would like to thank the members of the **steering committee**, which includes representatives of the Commission, our permanent representation in Brussels, our anti-discrimination organisation, the Haute Autorité de Lutte contre les Discriminations, and a number of ministries, not only my own.

The richness of the discussions held since yesterday on the **issues of equality and discrimination, which, I repeat, are among the highest priorities of**

the French Presidency in terms of social affairs, has given a clearer **picture of the challenges Europe is facing in a particularly difficult economic and social climate**. Exchanging good practice in equality and the fight against multiple discrimination helps make cohesion a major issue in Europe's social policy.

Non-discrimination is already recognised as **one of the fundamental values** of the European Union, but, as you know, the level of legal protection in place to defend these values varies between member states and depends on the reason for the discrimination.

With regard to the continuing inequalities on the basis of race or ethnic origin, age, religious belief, disability and gender, **it is important that we reinforce EU law and fulfil the aspirations of Europe's citizens**.

For the next stage of this work, and I am thinking in particular of the work that will be done by the **future group of government experts**, I would like to see a focus on the question of "mainstreaming": incorporating equality issues in public policy.

The group will provide a special forum for **discussing and exchanging good practice on non-legislative means of combating discrimination**.

For example, one of our ambitions is to help mentalities evolve in a specialist area of mine, equality between women and men.

The member states are called upon to promote specific actions with the aim of eradicating stereotypes in education, culture, training, careers guidance and employment.

Inequalities remain in all countries with regard to women's access to responsible positions. The famous glass ceiling persists. Similarly, despite the increase in women's qualifications, only 30% of company directors in Europe are women, compared with 50% in the USA.

These observations demonstrate clearly that there is still a long way to go. We will have a further opportunity to **discuss these issues at the conference I will chair in Lille on 13 and 14 November.**

Ministers across Europe acknowledged the situation on 9 June by adopting conclusions aimed at eliminating gender stereotypes from society. We can only applaud this decision.

I would also like to pay tribute to Mrs Eva-Britt Svensson's report on how marketing and advertising affect equality between women and men.

On this issue, I have taken the opportunity of the French Presidency to launch a **media monitoring project with the aim of encouraging the 27 member states** to adopt an approach that coincides fully with the concept of mainstreaming.

The legislative framework is one thing; its concrete, effective application is quite another: only with **the involvement of all actors at all levels** will the rights and obligations imposed by the legislation be known and applied. Equality organisations and civil society, but also the social partners, local authorities and the media have a crucial role to play.

Firstly, the Summit's discussions have led to an assessment of the main areas of discrimination in access to education, employment, careers, professional training and access to goods and services.

Secondly, they enabled a more detailed analysis of the roles of certain bodies whose anti-discrimination activities could be reinforced, such as equality organisations, local actors and opinion leaders.

Finally, they provided a chance to discuss the various tools available to us to change the reality on the ground, such as legislation and voluntary action going beyond legislation.

The conference has also provided an opportunity for initial discussion and debate with all the actors concerned about the **proposed directive** presented by the Commission. Mr Van der Pas has just mentioned this. There will be a chance to **take these discussions further at the EPSSCO Council meeting on 2 October.**

The French Presidency wishes to achieve the best text possible as quickly as possible on this issue.

As Xavier Bertrand pointed out yesterday, **the commitment of all the actors concerned, in maintaining a high level of ambition, will be necessary to complete EU legislation in the area of combating discrimination.**

In the **field of employment**, the fight against discrimination on the grounds of age, disability, gender, origin, religion or sexual orientation remains a priority. As Mr Van der Pas said, the positive role that **business and the social partners** can play is essential.

The ideas of **voluntary charters**, signed by companies or local authorities, and of **labels** identifying firms that have established good practice, are now widespread and often used in France, and their extension to other countries in the Union seems a promising avenue.

I think enough has now been said: it is time to make way for some music. We are delighted to be able to introduce you to the Maitrise de Radio France, founded over sixty years ago. More than just a choir, the formation is at the heart of a project begun nearly two years ago. It enables 60 children aged 8 to 17 from 14 different nationalities and a wide variety of backgrounds to combine their schooling with a high-level musical education focusing on choral singing.

A big thank you to the artists who will now take the stage!