



COMMISSION EUROPÉENNE
DG Emploi, affaires sociales et égalité des chances

Opening speech by Belinda Pyke, Director for Equality between women and men, Action against discrimination, Civil Society

Conference on "Professional equality between men and women, an economic stake facing the demographic challenge"

November 13th & 14th 2008 – Lille (France)

On behalf of the European Commission I would like to thank the French Presidency for the organisation of this very important and timely conference.

Gender equality policies have a positive role to play in the current political context of financial crisis and economic slowdown as well as in the longer term responses to the underlying competitiveness and demographic challenges which our societies face.

Diversifying choices in career guidance, promoting women in decision-making, the quality of jobs, equal pay between women and men and reconciliation issues as well as the often neglected roles of local and regional actors would each merit a conference of their own.

But it is right to view them as interlinked and mutually supportive and so I welcome the challenging, ambitious and original approach taken by the French Presidency for this event which the European Commission is pleased to support.

Gender equality can only be achieved with a clear commitment at the highest political level the full involvement of all stakeholders.

This conference is therefore a great opportunity to bring together the different actors, EU Institutions, Member States, social partners, civil society, enterprises and academics to present and exchange their valuable experiences and good practice on the ground.

I would now like to tell you briefly about some initiatives the Commission is undertaking in co-operation with the relevant actors in the main fields which we will be discussing in the next day and a half.

First and foremost, combating **gender stereotypes** is vital if we are to overcome gender inequalities and the Commission is lending its support in this field.

For example we have launched a campaign of awareness-raising actions in companies to combat gender stereotypes. This campaign is addressed to the social partners and civil society because we are conscious of their essential role and the benefit of their experience in tackling stereotypes.

We want to help companies to better understand that it is in their own interest to combat gender stereotypes as it will help them to deal with skills shortage, improve human resources management and gain competitive advantage.

The commitment of the social partners is very important and we welcome their activities in this area, in particular in the context of their framework of actions for gender equality

Secondly, it is important to continue our efforts to increase women's **employment**, in particular in the context of the current economic slowdown, as this is the way towards women's economic independence and a benefit for the economy and the society at large.

Increasing the **quality** of women's jobs is also important. Better jobs attract better workers and allow them to fully exploit their productive potential.

I am convinced that the discussions we will have on the different issues related to job quality (part-time, improving workers' skills, parental leave) will be very fruitful and contribute to improving our policy-making.

An inevitable consequence of gender stereotypes and the lower value placed on 'women's' jobs is the flagrant gender gap in **decision-making** posts, at all levels.

We know that this gap cannot be explained by relative merits and, indeed the current economic situation confirms the importance of mobilising all the talents. This is not the time to sacrifice skills and productive potential because of outdated perceptions of women and men's roles and leadership abilities. And we cannot continue to ignore the evidence of the positive relationship between having women in management and an organisation's performance.

Gender balance in decision-making needs stronger commitment and partnership at all levels: governments, regional and local authorities, political parties, social partners, business managers, human resources teams, NGOs, educational institutions, media, men and women.

Women's organisations in particular make a significant contribution to promoting women's participation in public life. But we all have our individual part to play, whether as voters or consumers, parents or policy makers.

The European Commission will continue to support Member States' actions, in particular by collecting, analysing and disseminating comparable data on the persistent gender gaps, and by promoting networking between all stakeholders and the exchange of experience and good practices at European level.

The third area I want to address is the **gender pay gap** is one of the consequences of the inferior quality of women's jobs. It goes beyond the question of equal pay for equal work. It reflects inequalities on the labour market mainly affecting women.

The Commission has highlighted in its Communication of 2007 "Tackling the pay gap between women and men" that the pay gap is a complex issue and that much more efforts are necessary to improve the situation.

Member States should integrate this issue in their employment policies, promote equal pay among employers and support exchange of good practices across the EU by involving the social partners.

For its part, the European Commission considers that the Community legislation has played a key role in achieving progress for women in the labour market, but has not closed the gender pay gap.

The Commission is analysing the current legislation concerning the reasons for the gender pay gap. A study has been launched and a conference will be organised in 2009 with all the stakeholders. The Commission will then propose modifications to the current legislation in 2010 if appropriate. We will also pay heed to the important report on the pay gap by Edith Bauer MEP to be debated next week in Strasbourg.

Finally, the Commission will launch an information campaign at European level to raise the awareness of the social partners and entrepreneurs on the benefits of promoting gender equality within their companies.

Let me close by referring to **reconciliation**: the gender pay gap and the under-representation of women in decision-making positions reflect the difficulties of reconciling work with private life, difficulties faced much more by women than men. Women's career paths are more often interrupted, slower and shorter, and hence less well paid than men's.

The European Commission is convinced that better reconciliation policies will contribute to a better integration of women in the labour market but also to economic competitiveness and to demographic renewal.

After having launched a formal consultation of the social partners and taken into account their opinions, the Commission recently tabled proposals to improve the minimum conditions for maternity leave for the employed and the self-employed. We have also reported on the progress towards achieving Europe-wide targets on childcare provision.

The Commission has also carried out a consultation with social partners on the revision of legislation on parental leave leaving open the possibility of discussion on other types of leave, such as paternity leave or adoption leave.

In September, the social partners started formal negotiations on updating the existing EU rules in these areas. We hope that they will soon make progress in their discussions and that we can propose amendments to the current legislation.

The debates today and tomorrow will provide a valuable insight into the actions being carried out on the ground by all actors and will show once again that the mobilisation of all stakeholders is crucial if we want to achieve gender equality.

Finally let me thank the French presidency for the important work on gender equality done during this semester, work which I am sure will bear fruit in the years to come. I would also thank Joelle Voisin for the excellent cooperation we have had with her and her team.