Equality between women and men in the European Union - 2011

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PURPOSE: presentation of the Commission Staff Working paper on Annual Report 2010 on equality between men and women.

CONTENT: the report points out that, despite a general trend towards more equality in society and on the labour market, **progress in eliminating gender inequalities remains slow**. Meeting the employment targets in the Europe 2020 Strategy will be a challenge, and this report highlights the importance of gender equality for reaching those targets.

This report takes stock of the situation for gender equality in the European Union in five significant areas in the first year of the Strategy for Equality between Women and Men (2010-2015). It points out that despite a general trend towards more equality in society and on the labour market, **progress in eliminating gender inequalities remains slow**. Meeting the employment targets in the Europe 2020 Strategy will be a challenge, and this report highlights the importance of gender equality for reaching those targets.

Most Member States do have ongoing gender equality plans or strategies, which both support gender mainstreaming and initiate specific actions. In previous years, gender equality policies everywhere in the EU have not only improved the situation and rights of women, but have significantly contributed to economic growth and social welfare.

By launching its new Strategy, the European Commission reiterates its **commitment to promoting gender equality in all its policies**.

This report is the first annual report presented after the adoption of the Europe 2020 Strategy and the Commission's new Strategy for Equality between Women and Men (2010-2015). It describes recent developments in gender equality in the EU and presents statistics on all areas covered as well as recent new developments in the Member States.

It establishes a state of play for the five priority areas of the Women's Charter and the Strategy, namely:

(1) Equal economic independence: sustained employment participation will strengthen women's lifelong economic independence and enable them to have adequate pensions. Between 2009 and 2010 the difference between female and male employment rates narrowed by 0.4% from 13.3% to 12.9%. At national level, significant differences exist throughout the EU. Still, any positive assessment of the trend in women's employment is offset by the fact that so many work part-time. A major reason for women's low employment rates is the challenge of reconciling work, family and private life. The labour market participation of mothers is 11.5% lower than that of women without children, while the rate for fathers is 8.5% higher than that for men without children. In addition, poorly designed tax and benefit systems, in particular joint taxation, can - in combination with a lack of affordable and high quality childcare facilities - create strong disincentives for second earners to take up work.

Providing a sufficient number of **high-quality, affordable and accessible childcare** is a vital step in offering parents, and especially women, a genuine choice to work. Moreover, **care for the elderly** and disabled is becoming a significant challenge with the ageing of the population, for society as a whole and for women in particular. Mothers often take care of both children and older relatives, sometimes at the

same time. In the EU, around 30 % of women with care responsibilities say they are inactive or work part-time because of the lack of care services for children and other dependent persons.

The year 2010 saw the adoption of Directive 2010/41/EC on the application of the principle of **equal treatment between men and women engaged in an activity in a self-employed capacity**. This was the first provision at EU level for a maternity allowance for self-employed workers and their spouses or life partners.

(2) Equal pay: women across the EU earn 17.5% less on average than men and there has been no reduction of the gender pay gap in the last few years. Member States have fully transposed the EU legislation on equal pay but the pay gap is unlikely to be solved by legal means alone. The underlying causes remain numerous and complex, not only reflecting discrimination on the grounds of sex but also **inequalities linked to education, the horizontal and vertical segregation of the labour market, the difficulty of reconciling work, family and private life**, the unequal distribution of family and domestic responsibilities, the lack of pay transparency and the impact of gender roles influencing the choice of education and vocational training courses. The Council conclusions adopted under the Belgian Council Presidency on the gender pay gap are thus an important step. In its conclusions, the Council invites Member States to adopt or pursue a comprehensive set of measures to tackle the full range of causes of the gender pay gap linked to the labour market inequalities between women and men.

(3) Equality in decision-making: the higher up the hierarchy, the fewer women there are. The percentage of women in key political and economic positions is roughly unchanged from last year. In 2010, the governments of three EU Member States (Germany, Finland and Slovakia) were led by women, while the average number of female members of national parliaments (single/lower houses) was 24%, one p.p. higher than in 2005. In parallel, still only 3 % of the largest publicly quoted companies have a woman chairing the highest decision-making body.

Yet the majority of the population are women and their participation in decision-making can make for more targeted policies and stronger and more prosperous democracies. The business case for having women in senior positions has been boosted by independent research suggesting a c**orrelation between companies with women in decision-making positions and good performance**. It also seems that gender diversity brings a number of vital benefits to boardrooms, such as higher returns, better overall performance, better risk management and greater employment of female talents.

Some countries also have corporate governance codes stressing the importance of diversity and gender equality. Corporate codes sometimes contain special transparency rules on the composition of the board. Generally speaking, countries that have introduced these types of codes also have a higher proportion of women at board level — for instance Sweden and Finland.

Other measures to improve gender balance include voluntary commitments. Denmark and the Netherlands have charters to promote women in management. The United Kingdom is undertaking a review on how obstacles can be removed to allow women to make it to the boards. The Commission will establish a direct dialogue with industry and urges private companies to make special efforts to address persistent imbalances in decision-making positions.

(4) Fight against sexual violence: fighting against all forms of violence against women is one of the top priorities of the current Trio of presidencies (Spain, Belgium, Hungary) and of the European Commission but there is still a lack of timely, reliable, accurate and comparable data at both national and EU level. There are several reasons why data are scarce.

A recent Eurobarometer survey appears to reveal the widespread nature of domestic violence across the EU: one out of every four respondents claims to know a woman among friends or in the family circle who has been a victim of domestic violence. During the ‘Women Ministers Summit on violence against

women' organised by the Belgian Presidency, a declaration was signed in order to encourage and support further appropriate action at EU level. The Commission will in 2011 propose an ambitious but realistic package of legislative and practical measures aimed at changing attitudes towards victims and bringing them into the heart of the criminal justice system. This **'victims' package'** will also include measures to combat gender-based violence more effectively.

(5) Gender equality beyond the Union: as part of the enlargement process, the Commission will continue to monitor the transposition, implementation and enforcement of EU legislation in the gender equality area in the candidate countries and potential candidates in 2011. Gender equality is also addressed in the accession negotiations on social policy and employment with Turkey and Iceland.

Cooperation with, and the support of, civil society organisations and women's networks working in this area remains a key objective of EU policy. Several Member States also have action plans to implement Resolution 1325. In 2010, more than 130 EU delegations in non-EU countries were actively involved in the implementation of the 2008 EU Guidelines on violence against women and girls and the combating of all forms of discrimination against them. Gender equality issues were also discussed in several human rights dialogues and consultations.

UN WOMEN, the new UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, became operational in January 2011 when several bodies merged to form a new, stronger gender entity, marking a milestone in UN reform. UN WOMEN amalgamates the UN's policies and practical work in this area and will improve the promotion of effective system-wide gender mainstreaming in the UN. Cooperation between the EU and UN WOMEN boosts the promotion of gender equality outside the Union.

As part of the Commission strategy to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), it adopted a Plan of Action on Gender Equality and **Women's Empowerment** in Development for the period up to 2015. The Action Plan's overarching objective is to meet the MDG more quickly and in particular MDG 3 ('Promoting gender equality and empowering women') and MDG 5 ('Improving maternal health').

Lastly, as regards **governance**: the new Strategy for Equality between Men and Women sets out the Commission's work programme for incorporating gender equality into all its work and taking specific action to promote equality between women and men. It lays the foundations for cooperation with the EU institutions and the Member States. Partnership with all stakeholders at EU level has proved to be the key to progress in achieving gender equality. In line with the European Parliament's proposal, the Strategy seeks to strengthen the partnership by holding an annual top-level Gender Equality Dialogue. Council conclusions on the new Strategy were adopted under the Belgian Presidency.