



30 April 2013

### **IRISH PRESIDENCY 2013 GENDER EQUALITY CONFERENCE: “WOMEN’S ECONOMIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE EUROPE 2020 AGENDA”**

**PRINTWORKS CONFERENCE CENTRE, DUBLIN CASTLE, IRELAND**

**INTERVENTION OF Ms. ANU SAJAVAARA, CHAIR OF BUSINESSEUROPE’S EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES NETWORK**

*Closing session*

**I would like to thank the Irish presidency for organising this conference. The tone has been positive and constructive and you have provided us with many concrete examples of good practices. These show that companies are very committed to promoting diversity and gender equality thus encouraging women's economic engagement.**

- The EU is at a turning point. The economic growth is stagnating and the recovery is still fragile. For women who have enjoyed decades of successful integration into the labour markets the last years have not brought much progress. In some countries the good development has halted. We must however, keep in mind that there are significant differences between the Member States and the challenges must be addressed individually in each country. Outside the EU the picture is even more diversified and huge challenges for women's economic engagement remain.
- Gender equality is not a zero sum game. Both men and women face challenges which must be tackled. It is a win-win situation where everyone, both women and men, girls and boys, take the necessary space and share responsibilities in the society and in the labour market.
- We are going through difficult times. In looking at economic engagement, the first issue we must address is economic growth. We need to bring back job opportunities in the labour markets. Job creation and the involvement of companies in creating new job opportunities, should be our primary target and will benefit both men and women.
- The European economy is strongly connected with what happens in the rest of the world. The European companies are facing fierce competition in the global markets and this will eventually also have an impact on our



European social models. Instead of standing still, Europe needs to draw inspiration of the changes and move forward. Better gender balance and increasing diversity can contribute in bringing about the necessary drive and innovation for European companies to succeed.

- The Europe 2020 Strategy and the European semester aim to foster policy coordination in Europe. More specifically, one of the main goals is to strengthen economic governance with a more integrated fiscal policy and structural reforms. It is therefore necessary to address the major structural challenges of demographic aging in Europe. Fostering the right conditions for economic growth through structural reforms is a prerequisite.
- In my own country - Finland, there are currently more women in the labour than there are men. It is not because women are doing well but because men are not doing so well. In most EU countries women's employment rate is still below 60 % - far away from the 75 % target for both women and men. With the real GDP growth down from +2.1 % in 2010 to -0.3 % last year in the EU, the prospects for new job opportunities are weak both for women and men.
- Many countries are facing extremely high levels of youth unemployment. In general, young men seem to have more difficulties in entering the labour market than young women. The education gap between the genders is also increasing narrowing young men's job opportunities. Member States have been trying to tackle this problem by providing youth guarantees, easing transitions from education to work and increasing cooperation between workplaces and educational institutions. There is a lot to be done in this field.
- To increase women's labour market participation we need to create incentives aiming at better utilizing women's talents and identify and remove the barriers for women's employment both at Member State and workplace level. Instead of creating mechanical and artificial one-size-fits-all solutions, such as the proposed quota directive, we should look for sustainable solutions and address country-specific and branch-specific challenges.
- In some countries the availability of accessible and quality childcare is still a huge problem, in some other countries the gender-segmented labour market leads to labour and skills shortages. By addressing these country- and culture-specific challenges we can ensure a more equal participation of men and women at all sectors and occupations in the labour market.



- There are also many initiatives at company-level. Companies are very engaged in tackling the obstacles which might slow or stop women's career progression. They are very committed to identifying and nurturing women's talents by changing corporate culture and creating new and innovative internal HR practices to increase diversity and inclusion at the workplace.
- One way of addressing the imbalances of the labour market is to promote flexible ways of working and adaptable working time models to attract and retain skilled employees. Flexible practices benefit not only women but also men with small children, and increase motivation and commitment at work.
- Instead of resisting change, we should look at the changing world of work with open mind. For instance temporary work is often seen as a negative phenomenon even though it plays a significant role as a stepping stone for the young or unemployed and eases transitions into work after periods of inactivity. Removing financial and taxation barriers can also effectively attract more women into entering the labour market.
- We would like to pass a message to the Member States and Commission: there have been many good projects in the past years addressing equal opportunities financed from the ESF. There is very little reliable data available on how the ESF money is spent and we need to know more about the achievements. For this purpose, we should assess the impact of the various programmes. Unfortunately the dissemination of the results and findings does not always work in the best possible way and the good practices or approaches do not find their way into everyday life or change old behavioural patterns. The funds allocated should be spent wisely and address significant and crucial issues such as provision of childcare. In our view, we also need to better coordinate existing initiatives within the different DGs and work done by the Gender Institute for Gender Equality.
- In addition to addressing the shortages of childcare services, the Member States should focus on priority areas such as gender-segmentation of the labour market and educational choices and gender stereotypes. This includes measures aiming at increasing the number of women in studying STEM skills and enticing more women into innovation. Support for economic independence and entrepreneurship will also contribute to improving women's economic engagement.

\* \* \*