

Address by Ms Kathleen Lynch T.D., Minister of State for Disability, Equality, Mental Health and Older Persons, Ireland at the launch of the Gender Equality Index, developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality

13 June 2013, Brussels

President Van Rompuy, Ministers and distinguished guests.

During the final weeks of Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, I am delighted to join you here as we launch the new Gender Equality Index for the European Union.

As I have said on many occasions during our Presidency, membership of the European Union has been very influential in the achievement of gender equality in Ireland. The adoption of the gender equality acquis helped us to move from a traditional patriarchal society to become a country in which women are now making their mark in all levels of the economy and the workforce.

In that 40 year period, the international standing of our small country was raised through the human rights and peace building work of our two female Presidents, Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese who between them served for some 21 years. While they have now been succeeded by a male President, President Michael D. Higgins is no traditionalist as a former parliamentarian, international human rights activist and committed feminist.

Today, I am not here to talk about Ireland but rather to focus on gender equality in Europe. In so doing, I have to make mention of the current debate on gender equality and the contribution which de facto or true gender equality can make to economic growth and to personal well-being. This has been an ongoing theme during our Irish Presidency programme on gender equality.

As President Van Rompuy will already be aware, much of the recent debate in relation to the Europe 2020 agenda has focused on the challenges of unemployment and particularly youth unemployment. However, I believe we also need to take a longer term view, in parallel with the more immediate challenges.

The key employment goal of Europe 2020 envisages that 75 per cent of women and men of working age would be in employment by 2020. It is widely acknowledged that this target can only be met if there are concerted efforts to increase women's participation in the labour market. This was recognised in the Council Conclusions following the European Council in March this year and it needs to be stated and restated to emphasise the importance of this message.

As shown in the EPSCO policy debate on Europe 2020 in February, all Member States appear to be of like mind in this regard. The economic importance of expanding female labour market participation is also evidenced by the work on Country Specific Recommendations as part of the National Reform Process.

We know that women's employment rate in many of the EU's global competitor countries now exceeds the EU's performance on this indicator. Therefore, these countries may experience a competitive advantage. We also know that we have a very well educated female workforce in Europe and that it is essential that women are encouraged to remain attached to the workforce for an optimal period.

During our Irish Presidency, we hosted a number of gender equality events in relation to the theme of women and employment. We chose this theme for a number of reasons. Firstly, it linked with the overarching theme of the Irish Presidency – stability, growth and jobs.

Secondly, from a gender perspective, we believed that the time was right for a further discussion on the topic of women, work and the economy. We are approaching the mid-term of the Europe 2020 policy next year and we believe that it is pertinent to refocus on the need to engage greater numbers of women in active economic life to achieve the employment target.

Finally, we were also of the view that women's economic engagement is central to their personal financial independence and the avoidance of poverty.

Apart from the formal EPSCO debate which I mentioned previously, we also had a workshop on work and older women for EPSCO Ministers, during their informal visit to Dublin in February. Here we heard that only 52 per cent of older women are at work across Europe, compared with 66.2 per cent of older men. This impacts upon pension entitlements and increases the risk of poverty in old age.

In April, we hosted a major conference on the topic of Women's Economic Engagement and the Europe 2020 Agenda, thanks to generous funding from the European Commission. In preparing for that event, we found that some 25 million men of working age are outside the labour market in the European Union, while 46 million women are outside the labour market. By "outside the labour market" we mean that they are neither employed, self employed nor unemployed.

Accordingly, there is an untapped pool of labour in the EU in which women outnumber men by almost 2 to 1. We also know from our statistics that women across Europe tend to be better educated than men and therefore this huge pool of untapped, well educated, human resources represents a missed economic opportunity.

In our Presidency conference on "gender equality and Europe 2020" in Dublin, we explored all the barriers and challenges which women experience in the work place. We heard evidence from the OECD that the increased engagement of women in work could bring significant growth to our countries. We heard new evidence to support many of the Country Specific Recommendations sent to Member States, in relation to childcare and other barriers.

We also heard very positive messages from individual multi-national companies which have taken very specific steps to foster the advancement of women. One major company told us how they had conducted a root and branch review of attitudes within their firm to ensure that they retained their excellent female staff. Another said that retaining and promoting its highly educated female workforce was central to its

commercial success. We will be circulating an outcome report and DVD of that particular conference.

However, in focusing during our Presidency on women, work and economic growth, we did not lose sight of the human dimension. We were aware, for example, that the first goal of the European Commission's current Strategy for Gender Equality is "economic independence for women." We, in Ireland, echo the importance of this goal. Therefore, in each of our gender equality events, during the Presidency we used the phrase "win – win". As we explored each topic, we linked the personal long term benefits to women with the overarching goal of economic growth.

The Europe 2020 Agenda also includes a target in relation to the reduction of poverty levels in Europe. We know that older women experience a high risk of poverty because of interrupted careers, lower pensionable work years and a high dependency rate. We need to foster women's understanding of these issues and their importance in long term life planning. This is the key to the "win – win" scenario.

With extended health and the prospect of longer lives, we need to encourage younger women to remain in the labour market, and older women to return to the labour market, to ensure that they too achieve economic and financial independence and avoid poverty in their older years.

While some may cite the high levels of unemployment across many Member States at present, particularly for young people, we know from the EU economic policy agenda that there are still many opportunities in the green economy, in the white economy and in ICT. These high-growth sectors all afford opportunities to women to educate and retrain if necessary for new careers which will benefit both their personal circumstances and economic growth in Europe.

You may, by now, be wondering about the linkage between these short words on the Irish Presidency, Europe 2020 and today's topic of the Gender Equality Index. National gender equality experts here present will know that the European Commission and the Council of Ministers actively encourage collaboration among Member States to foster gender equality. Together they oversee influential work programmes of research, data collection and exchanges of good practice, enabling us to learn from each other and to review progress at both EU and national levels.

The European Institute for Gender Equality was tasked to prepare a gender equality index for Europe. Today we are delighted to be part of the launch of its first report and its first index. This report and its country profiles bring another valuable set of statistics to the table in an inclusive manner to enable us politicians, and our policy makers, to determine how we are performing on a wide range of parameters.

The development of a gender index is indeed a challenging task and the range of material encompassed in these publications is a testament to the commitment of the Director and staff of the Institute, who have worked to produce such a detailed body of work in a comparatively short time span and who are to be congratulated.

Taken together, the tables in the report and the country profiles offer us many indicators of the challenges that remain in relation to gender equality across Europe,

both from an employment and economic perspective and in looking at women in leadership roles. The benefit of this new work is the wide range of new data it collates together in two excellent compendia. With all data, there is plenty of scope for additional exploration and we look forward to seeing new work evolve in the coming years.

From a pan-EU perspective, I would like to use this opportunity to thank you, President Van Rompuy, for your continuing engagement with the challenges of gender equality. I would ask that you continue to deliver to European leaders the message that the attainment of “de facto” gender equality is a “win – win” situation for Europe, its citizens and the economy. It offers an economic “win” for Europe and each of its Member States and a personal “win” for each of its female citizens in the form of greater economic independence for women and their families, particularly to avoid poverty.

Congratulations again to the European Gender Institute on its excellent and most useful Index which will support this work both at central and at Member State levels.

Thank you very much.

ENDS