



**EUROPEAN COUNCIL
THE PRESIDENT**



Brussels, 13 June 2013
EUCO 138/13
PRESSE 257
PR PCE 121

**Speech by President of the European Council
Herman Van Rompuy
at the European Gender Equality Index Launch conference**

It brings me great pleasure to welcome you here on my home turf, in the Justus Lipsius building where the diplomats and staff of the Secretariat general work very hard to build a better Europe, and where the Presidents and Prime Ministers of all our member states meet as the European Council – working also very hard, I can confirm it. Men and women.

Allow me to begin by explaining the name of this building, "Justus Lipsius." Justus Lipsius was a Flemish philosopher, born in 1547 in Overijse a short distance from Brussels, and who passed away in Leuven in 1606. Throughout his life, he studied and taught all across Europe, from Koln to Leiden, from Vienna to Rome. A real Belgian and a real European! Joost Lips (in my native Dutch) was a humanist, and his reflections put the individual at the centre of philosophy and political thought. Europe, our political culture, have gained a great deal from the works of thinkers such as Justus Lipsius and his peers, who emphasised conduct based on reason, and the respect of the individual.

And this brings me straight to the topic of this conference. Indeed it is these exact same principles that drive your work today. Europe has a proud record of advancing the cause of gender equality, including through legislation that guarantees our citizens equal pay and freedom from discrimination. The principle of equality is prominently enshrined in the EU Treaties.

But we all know that gender equality has yet to be fully realised in practice. For that, we have mainly our own blindness to blame. To a blatant fact...: half of our citizens are women. And because we don't understand well enough the situation of women, we don't understand ourselves. And this in turn prevents us from turning equality into a reality.

P R E S S

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EUCO 138/13

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When we compile statistics on gender equality, or indeed any statistics broken down by sex, the point is not to conduct research on a separate species called "women." No, the point is to enrich and complete, and often even to correct, our image of the citizen, which without that understanding would be absurdly incomplete. In that sense, humble statistics have a vital role to play in the political process. Our policies must be designed with both sexes in mind. This is a challenge. But by improving the statistical basis of our policies we can also improve the policies themselves.

So here we are today, here to welcome it 'hot off the press': the inaugural report on the European Gender Equality Index. I would like congratulate Ms Langbakk, the Director of the Gender Institute, for this achievement. Thank you to you and your team.

Leafing through the report, we see six core domains: work, health, money, knowledge, time and power. There are also two cross-cutting domains: intersecting equalities and violence. A sophisticated tool such as this can help policy-makers keep track of our progress as we seek to turn our societies into more equal ones. Or, to put it better, as we strive to make them more human. "Equal" does not mean "identical". On the contrary: it means more diversity, more openness. It also means more equal opportunities for each of us.

This Index is specially designed with the European gender equality policy set-up in mind. Now, policy-makers can point to hard evidence and say: here we are doing well, but here we need to do better. This works. This doesn't. Here we still have an unfair gap. Why? Of course such a tool can only be a work in progress. Statisticians know very well that their work requires constant updating and tireless reassessment. But this is already a very useful step forward.

Allow me to highlight just one aspect: employment. Fighting unemployment is a crucial priority for the European Union today. How could it not be, when we see so many talented women and men, young and old, searching for work in vain? Boosting employment is also a vital part of the European Union's struggle to overcome its economic difficulties, it is at the heart of the work of the European Council. It has been for quite some time.

Exactly three years ago, in June 2010, European leaders adopted a common roadmap for our policies for the current decade. Known in our circles as the "Europe 2020 Strategy", it contains a headline target on employment, namely, "aiming to raise to 75% the employment rate for women and men aged 20-64." It was amended during a meeting. Here, gender-sensitive statistics cast a particularly bright light. And that light shows us an opportunity. In Europe today, women's employment lags far behind that of men. In 2012, male employment in the EU was at 74.6 per cent. The employment rate of women was only 62.4 per cent.

Yes. I call this an opportunity. Boosting women's employment is something we need to do because women are suffering the effects of the crisis. It's a matter of fairness. It is also a sound economic step. It offers long-term benefits. If we succeed in improving women's position in the labour market, this will help make our competitiveness rise, our fiscal balance to improve and businesses will benefit from greater diversity in ideas and approaches.

The report we have before us helps us grasp the specific problems we face. We see, for example, that women often work in sectors where pay is low: in education, in health care and in social work. Of course we all know that on average women do more unpaid housework and informal care work than men. Not surprisingly, those same women work fewer hours and fewer years in paid employment – a fact that has worrying implications for their economic independence and for their pension rights.

The statistics before us also show that labour market policies are of a piece with education policies. How can we possibly afford for well-educated women not to fulfil their potential on the labour market, at all levels and in all sectors?

After all, sixty per cent of university degrees in our Union now go to women. It is a great achievement in the battle for equality. Yet we need more women to study engineering, manufacturing, science, technology and maths, the key disciplines of tomorrow's innovative economy. We also need more men to teach in our schools and to work in our hospitals. And, ladies and gentlemen, we also need to address the specific problems faced by men: the health and safety risks they run at work, their difficulty to get parental leave, and the fact that men are falling behind women in terms of educational attainment. Gender equality is not just for women... we shouldn't forget that men are human too!

Gender equality is a highly politicised and complex field, with multiple policy challenges. I therefore particularly welcome the attention that the new Index gives to intersecting inequalities. European women have different backgrounds, some more privileged than others. An older woman who has moved to a new country may have to fight hard to enter the labour market. The same goes for lone carers and persons with disabilities.

It is only through rigorous statistics that we can better understand the barriers we must sweep away, and the gaps we must bridge through sound, long-term policies. The Gender Equality Index is a timely addition to our toolbox. For equality is not a luxury. It is a necessity. Both men and women should benefit from the same conditions and the same opportunities in order to strengthen our social fabric and in order to create more jobs and more growth. In short, equality is good for society and good for the economy. Above all, gender equality is fair. Making it a reality is both reasonable and logical, in Europe's continuous endeavour to put the respect for each individual at the centre. It's an essential part of our Union of values.

I wish you a stimulating afternoon. And by the way, when you leave, you can see a bust representing Justus Lipsius in the main entrance to this building. As you walk through, I also invite you to admire the Nobel Prize that was awarded to the European Union in October last year. Needless to say, that prize goes to women and men, equally.