

Statement by Meg Munn MP, Deputy Minister for Women and Equality, to the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality

Location: European Parliament, Brussels

Speech Date: 13/07/05

Speaker: Meg Munn MP, Deputy Minister for Women and Equality

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to speak before you today.

Let me first thank you Mme. Zaborska for your thoughtful words about the appalling events in London last week. I know that we are all united in our condemnation of these indiscriminate terrorist attacks. This committee's concern for the respect and dignity of every individual represents values that are the absolute opposite of those of the terrorists. Together, across Europe, we will continue to work for a safe, as well as a fair society for all our citizens.

I join you as the UK minister with responsibility for both gender equality and wider equality issues. As a former chair of the Labour Party Parliamentary Committee for Women, these are issues particularly close to my heart and I am delighted to have been appointed at a time when the UK Presidency has the privilege of presiding over the Council of Ministers gender equality portfolio.

We are all committed to a Europe that brings together the talents of every citizen and maximises the potential of every individual. Equality between women and men, prohibition of discrimination and celebration of diversity are core principles of the EU.

I recognise and applaud the important work that this committee and the European Parliament as a whole, plays in seeking to make this shared vision a reality. Your work in relation to the position of women in Turkey has been most valuable and I congratulate the rapporteur, Emine Bozkurt, for highlighting important issues. I value dialogue with this Committee and look forward to answering your questions later.

I am sure you will already know that the UK's four overarching issues for our Presidency are climate change, Africa, economic reform and security. You will certainly know how vital these issues are for women and how seriously they are taken by women. One of the recent champions for a better response to climate change is Wangari Maathai, an inspirational Kenyan woman who won the Nobel Peace prize in 2004. She led a campaign to plant tens of millions of trees across Africa to slow deforestation. The movement grew to include projects to preserve biodiversity, educate people about their environment and promote the rights of women and girls.

Yesterday Kofi Annan marked World Population Day by deploring the discrimination faced by women and girls across the world. Two thirds of the

1.2 billion people living in extreme poverty are women; two thirds of the world's illiterate people are women, but as Kofi Annan also said yesterday, there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women. Development is an important theme in the plans for gender equality during the UK Presidency.

On security what we do together in Europe is critical to a peaceful future for us all. Just last week in London, in the shadow of the terrible terrorist attacks we experienced, we remembered and celebrated the end of the last World War. Since 1945 the strong ties we have forged in Europe have given us unprecedented decades of peace. The progressive enlargement of the Union has brought more and more countries under the protection and safety that comes from mutual respect and shared values.

As far as economic reform is concerned there can be no doubt that the contribution women can and do make is vital to our continuing economic growth and prosperity. I will say more about that shortly.

Before that, I would like to thank Mme Jacobs and her Luxembourg colleagues for the excellent work achieved throughout their presidency.

In particular I pay tribute to her robust leadership of the EU during difficult negotiations at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. We should all be delighted by the full reaffirmation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in March this year. We must continue to make progress on the twelve policy areas of critical concern as identified at Beijing.

2005 is a year of several anniversaries in the campaign for gender equality – the tenth anniversary of Beijing, the mid point of the Lisbon agenda and the five-year review of the millennium development goals. As the international community reviews progress we can feel some pride at what has been achieved, but we must recognise where more work is required.

We must face the reality that not enough has been done; gender equality has not been achieved and the Millennium Development Goals are not on track. This poses challenges for the world but also for the European Union.

As President of the Council of Ministers, we will be working closely with Luxembourg and Austria to drive this agenda forward, drawing from the Luxembourg Ministerial declaration in March, to reaffirm the challenges we face. We will work in close partnership with the European Commission and the European Parliament to achieve success.

One of the key conclusions from earlier this year was the central importance of institutional mechanisms to consolidating and expanding gender equality.

Governments and civil society together need to make the case for gender mainstreaming and we must be able to explain what gender mainstreaming is. How do we make the case for it in, say, transport policy, or funding for sport?

Institutions that are repositories of knowledge and disseminators of information are crucial to answering these questions. Thus one of the important issues on which we wish to make progress is the European Gender Institute.

The absence of reliable gender disaggregated statistics and the difficulty of effective communication between EU Institutions, governments, academics and social partners across the member states are significant barriers to creating effective policies promoting gender equality.

A European Gender Institute committed to greater co-ordination, dissemination of good practice and providing effective tools for gender mainstreaming will be a valuable addition. The UK Presidency looks forward with interest to what you and your Parliamentary colleagues have to say about this proposal.

I would like now to turn to another significant matter on the agenda for the UK Presidency.

One of the wider priorities of the UK Presidency is to take forward the 'better regulation' agenda.

In the gender field, the RECAST dossier is a good example of simplification and clarification of the acquis. We aim to make good progress during our Presidency. It is sensible to co-ordinate seven Directives and case law into one intelligible package, especially as some of those Directives date back to 1975 and 1976. The world of work and pensions has come a long way since then.

Rulings by the European Court of Justice have added greatly to the rights of workers (especially, but not only, women) and the responsibilities of employers. It is important that we work towards a clearer and simpler legislative framework.

I read with interest your comments on the Commission's proposal. We now need to engage in dialogue between Council and Parliament to complete this important piece of work.

Alongside these legislative and institutional innovations, the UK Presidency welcomes the Commission's recent Communication on Non-discrimination and the proposal for a Year of Equal Opportunities for All in 2007.

Like you, we will wish to ensure optimum and efficient use of EU resources. We welcome the Communication's emphasis on non-legislative measures to reach our shared goal of an equal and fair society. Although we can all see gaps in the legislative framework, I know we all recognise that culture change – changes in attitudes and behaviours – are a vital part of achieving that goal. This Communication has the potential to help us with that challenge.

We will continue to support an integrated approach towards non-discrimination policy. We recognise, for example, that disabled women, older

women and Black and Minority Ethnic women require complex and integrated – yet different – policy interventions.

The aim of the UK Presidency concerning the proposed Year of Equal Opportunities is to make as much progress as possible on this dossier.

All of these legislative dossiers will contribute to achieving a Europe that is economically dynamic, but also, importantly socially inclusive. This vision is central to our Presidency theme for gender equality, which looks at women and work in the light of the Lisbon strategy, Beijing and the Millennium Development Goals.

It is essential to focus our efforts on raising employment levels across Europe and ensuring equal employment opportunities for all. We face new challenges – the global economy, people living longer and happily remaining active longer –our employment strategies need to understand these.

Unemployment means wasted lives and wasted opportunities. A job is the best protection against poverty and social exclusion.

We need inclusive labour markets, free of discrimination, which offer opportunities to all. The priorities of the UK Presidency in the area of economic reform, employment, social policy and equal opportunities reflect these issues.

We will therefore focus both our key gender equality conference and our informal meeting of gender equality ministers on ‘women and work’. We will examine the critical role that progress towards gender equality can play in helping the EU to deliver the targets of the Lisbon Agenda.

We will look at examples of good practice both from across Europe and from the developing world.

For too long too many women have been restricted to so called “women’s work”: caring for children and elderly people, customer service in shops, banks and offices; piecework for low pay, and with little security. For everyone’s sake we need to continue to remove the barriers that define what women can do, and encourage women to move into new roles with a wider range of skills, as well as to set up their own businesses. During our conference in Birmingham, we will showcase different contexts in which practical solutions have been developed to change the reality of women’s – and men’s - experience of work.

Across Europe the responsibility for childcare still rests primarily on mothers. Now that we are living longer there are new challenges in looking after elderly family members too. We all – men and women – have personal lives that are important to us and our working lives need to be flexible. In Birmingham we will look at a number of different policies, structures and practices - including strategies for childcare - to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate fully in their workplace.

Birmingham is a diverse and vibrant city where nearly a third of the population are from non-white ethnic groups. We will be taking ministers to see women's empowerment projects in the region from a variety of different cultures, illustrating the different contributions these communities make to the city.

During our conference we will also examine how, for many women, particularly those with children or whose children have grown up, just getting a permanent job can be really tough. Women deserve much more than a series of temporary jobs and businesses and the economy need the contribution women can make.

Ensuring that women have the right skills for the workplace; helping them to feel confident and valued; putting in place policies that ensure women can progress from basic level employment up to the very top of their organisation; all these challenges need practical initiatives, often at local level, to change our working cultures.

Women need to be properly and fairly rewarded for the contribution they make. They need to have good access to health-care and time for their own needs. Eva-Britt Svensson's draft report on 'gender discrimination and health systems' is very important in this respect and the UK Presidency will be holding an event, Tackling Health Inequalities, which will be looking at some of these areas.

I am delighted that you, Madame Zaborska, have agreed to attend our conference and the Ministerial meeting that follows it in Birmingham, as a representative of your Committee. We have planned an innovative programme that will include direct learning from the experiences of local women who have faced discrimination and overcome obstacles.

The UK presidency will draft a statement at the end of the ministerial meeting that will be presented to the Employment and Social Affairs Council in December.

In the United Kingdom we have striven to raise the issues of the developing world, working together with other countries both in the EU and beyond.

The success of the Live 8 concerts in London, Paris, Rome, Berlin, Philadelphia, Johannesburg, Moscow and Tokyo show the ground swell of concern that our citizens share about supporting sustainable change in the developing world. We need to listen to and to learn from the experiences of developing countries; the positive stories as well as the worrying statistics.

We know that without the education of women, the economic independence of women, the sexual and reproductive freedom of women – in other words, without the emancipation and liberation of women – lasting change will remain a dream.

Mme Jacobs spoke to you in January with passion about the needs of women in the aftermath of the Tsunami in Asia and she included a representative from Mali, Mme Diakite Fatoumata N'Diaye, at her ministerial meeting.

We intend to build on this good practice at our conference in Birmingham by hearing from developing countries as partners in the global struggle for women's equality. We will also be representing the EU at the Millennium Review Summit in September and the United Nations General Assembly, where we shall endeavour to raise the profile of gender equality issues.

Madame Zaborska, I trust that I have given a useful and comprehensive outline of our presidency plans for the European Union in the gender equality area. Thank you again for inviting me to set out our agenda.

The strength of the European Union is its people, all its people. We must give everyone the opportunity to develop their talents, first as girls and boys, then as women and men. Together by working hard and listening to one another we can make this progress.

I look forward to the European Parliament and the Presidency working in synergy over the next six months and I am pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.