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**The role of regional and inter-governmental organizations
in promoting gender equality**

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* The paper has been reproduced as submitted.

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**High Level Panel "The role of regional and inter-governmental
organisations in promoting gender equality"**

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Statement by Ms Odile Quintin

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The 10th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action is a unique opportunity for the European Union and its Member States to affirm our strong commitment to the objectives and goals of the Platform and the outcome document of the so called "Beijing + 5" session, which should be a springboard for further progress. However, it is also an opportunity to review the progress made towards equality between women and men and in the implementation of the commitments taken in Beijing. We will look at the progress we made, but also to see the remaining challenges and shortcomings. This anniversary should give a fresh impetus to the process started in Beijing.

The Beijing Platform for Action was made possible because of the strong involvement of civil society: women's movements have indeed been the driving force behind of what can be considered the biggest event ever organised on equality between women and men. The promotion of equality between women and men and the empowerment of women require the mobilisation of all actors, civil society, social partners, Parliaments. In that respect, the European Parliament has played an important role.

But why in the new millennium, is it important to reach gender equality? Why is it essential for the European Union?

First of all, equality between women and men is a fundamental right and one of the basic principles of democracy. As a consequence, gender equality is and must remain a goal in itself. For this reason, the European Commission has just tabled a proposal for a "European Institute for Equality between women and men", with the aim of building a strong knowledge base which will allow Member States and the European institutions to promote appropriate policies towards gender equality.

Equality between women and men lies also at the heart of the European agenda for growth and jobs. Five years ago, the EU set itself a target: achieving a 60% female employment rate by 2010. This objective seems within reach if we keep on implementing policies geared towards reducing gender pay gaps, improving the provision of childcare facilities and promoting equal opportunities. A forceful implementation of these policies is needed in the light of demographic ageing, which will cut the working age population by 12 million between 2005 and 2025. The need to fully utilise the productive potential of the European labour force is thus a key to achieving growth and employment.

The European Commission has just launched its new Social Agenda for modernising Europe's social model under the revamped Strategy for growth and jobs. The new agenda focuses on providing jobs and equal opportunities for all and ensuring that the benefits of the EU's growth and jobs drive reach everyone in society. Equality between women and men will be a fundamental component of this Agenda.

FOLLOW-UP OF THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Legal framework

Equality between women and men has been one of the fundamental principles of the European Union since the very beginning. It is enshrined in the Treaty. Over the last few decades, equal treatment legislation has grown to form a coherent legal framework and is now a firmly established integral part of the so called 'acquis communautaire' that Member States must comply with. It is for that reason that the implementation of EU legislation into national laws was one of the pre-requisites for the accession of the ten Member States to the European Union in May 2004. It will be the same for the next round of accession.

Equality between women and men is strengthened in the new Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. In addition to the provisions of the current Treaty on gender equality, the Constitution provides that equality is a value of the Union, which should be promoted not only inside the Union but also in its external relations with the rest of the world.

But rights need to be enforced. Our challenge is to ensure that this enforcement is effective. To that aim, the Commission has proposed to recast existing directives in order to enhance awareness of them by citizens. The European Union is fully committed to ensuring that its Member States have an adequate administrative capacity in place to fulfil the new responsibilities arising from the legislation. This process involves civil society, citizens, NGOs, social partners, research institutes, the judiciary and administration.

This shows us that legislation is fundamental, but alone it is not enough.

Gender mainstreaming and specific measures

In the context of the European Union, the inclusion of the gender equality principle in the Treaty is a starting point for policies and actions, including the follow-up of the Beijing Platform for Action.

As Europeans, we owe a lot to the Platform.

First of all, it has given gender equality high political visibility. This has implied as a consequence the need for policy makers to commit themselves at the highest political level to promoting equality between women and men, including the empowerment of women in the economy. This has been achieved by EU heads of state and government, when they set an

employment rate target for women and a concrete target for childcare provision¹.

With its dual approach of gender mainstreaming and specific actions, the Platform has also reshaped policy-making in all areas - education, research, employment policies, inclusion policies, aid and development co-operation.

Following up on Beijing, a specific article has been included in the Treaty, which allows for gender mainstreaming. The implementation of gender mainstreaming is also the basis for deciding and planing specific measures focused on the under-represented sex. The European Union has firmly embraced the so-called "dual approach" towards gender equality – mixing specific measures and mainstreaming.

The European Employment Strategy has contributed to bringing gender equality to the policy agenda and provided a tool for tackling the gender gaps in the labour market. The new Employment Guidelines require reinforced efforts by Member States.

Employment is also the best weapon against poverty: this is at the basis of our Social Inclusion Process, where we also implement a gender mainstreaming approach. This is fundamental as European women, in particular elderly women, still have higher risks of poverty than men. Furthermore, single parents, mostly women, tend to suffer from cumulative disadvantages and are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion.

The Member States' National Action Plans on Social Inclusion also identified domestic violence as a risk of social exclusion for women. Domestic violence is an assault on the victim's right to life, safety, freedom and dignity and an expression of an imbalance of power between women and men. In 2000, the Daphne Programme 2000-2003² was introduced, and has been supporting concrete projects against violence, involving NGOs. Major steps forward were achieved in 2002, when the Member States agreed on a set of indicators on domestic violence against women, developed within the framework of the follow-up of the Beijing Platform for Action.

The use of Structural Funds, and in particular the European Social Fund, has had a catalysing effect for national policies on gender equality, by providing financial support for the implementation of the European Employment Strategy and the Social inclusion process.

Among the financial instruments, the Programme on Equality between women and men 2001-2005 has provided €50 million to fund projects for NGOs, research centres, for awareness raising, developments of statistics and indicators. This is an important tool for building a constructive dialogue with

¹ 90% of children between the age of three and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under three years of age by 2010

² Decision No.293/2000/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 January 2000 adopting a programme of Community action (the Daphne Programme) (2000 to 2003) on preventive measures to fight violence against children, young persons and women, OJ L34 of 9.2.2000, p. 1.

civil society. The Commission has now proposed a new Programme called PROGRESS which will continue to address the promotion of equality between women and men.

PROGRESS SO FAR

In the past decade positive developments towards equality between women and men are evident in the EU. Economic growth and general progress in society have made these developments possible. Changes have not happened automatically, but as a result of strategic policy initiatives to promote equality between women and men at EU and national level.

These have also been the result of the integrated approach we have towards gender equality, namely the combination of legislation, gender mainstreaming and specific measures, including financial instruments.

The so-called Open Method of Coordination – a unique experience we have in the European Union - has had a catalytic effect for the promotion of gender equality. It has brought together countries with different backgrounds and different starting points, stimulating them to achieve gender equality objectives and goals set at European level. Another important aspect of our policies is the partnership approach not only between the Member States and the Commission but also with the social partners. Their contribution for the achievement of gender equality is vital.

There have been major changes in education enrolment in Europe. Women now outnumber men in upper secondary and tertiary education in most Member States and they represent the majority of graduates in the European Union: 58 % in 2003. Women now also represent 41 % of PhD graduates.

These changes have been translated, although not completely, onto the labour market. Women's employment rates have increased more than men's, standing now at 55.1% in 2004, compared to less than 50% in the first half of 1990s. This is a tremendous improvement and an important step for women's empowerment. Gender gaps in employment have also decreased in the last few years.

Development of indicators and statistics

The EU support to the Beijing Platform for Action was highlighted at the highest political level by Heads of Government at the European Council Summit in Madrid in December 1995. This visible political support has framed the implementation and follow-up of the Beijing Platform since then and continues to provide the impetus for progress.

Since 1999, the Council of the European Union has – each year - adopted conclusions on indicators and benchmarks, thus making the annual monitoring process more focused and structured. Sets of quantitative and

qualitative indicators have been developed by subsequent Presidencies in some of the 12 critical areas of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action. Using these indicators, the Luxembourg Presidency has in this framework produced a Report on the progress and remaining challenges to achieving gender equality in the EU, ten years after Beijing.

The European Commission plays an active role in supporting EU Presidencies in this process for developing indicators. It will be important to further develop the set of core indicators for monitoring progress towards equality between women and men, including the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. This also requires regularly collecting adequate, coherent comparable statistics broken down by sex.

This is the way to make governments and policy makers accountable for their actions and decisions.

HOW CAN THE EUROPEAN UNION MEET THE REMAINING CHALLENGES FOR THE ACHIEVEMENT OF GENDER EQUALITY?

We have done a lot and we have achieved a lot in terms of gender equality. However, we have still a long way to go in order to achieve the objective of equality between women and men in the European Union. Despite the progress made, the gender gap in employment remains significant at 15.8 percentage points and the gender pay gap is still 15% in the European Union. We still have a problem of gender segregation in the labour market, which in fact starts already in the educational sector, as women's and men's choices of areas of study still show traditional gender stereotyped patterns.

Reconciliation of work and family life for both women and men remains a challenge. Women with small children continue to show employment rates 13.6 percentage points lower than women without children, while men with small children show 10 percentage points higher employment rates than men without children³. This is the result of limited access to childcare and gender stereotyped family patterns. Women perform the major part of the domestic work and consequently have more limited time for paid work. Men do less than 40 % of all domestic work and between 25% and 35% of childcare work in couples with children aged up to 6 years⁴.

At the Spring European Council 2004, it was acknowledged that gender equality policies are instruments of social cohesion as well as economic growth. Efforts to promote gender equality have so far mainly focused on women. Changes for women also affect men as gender equality is about the relationship between women and men based on equal rights, equal responsibilities and equal opportunities in all spheres of life.

Policies to reconcile work and family life for both women and men are our answer to the demographic challenge the European Union is facing.

³ Eurostat, LFS, 2003.

⁴ How Europeans spend their time, Eurostat, 1998-2002.

The provision of adequate care facilities remains the fundamental instrument for allowing women to enter and remain in the labour market throughout their lives. We need to boost the provision of affordable, accessible childcare facilities of good quality, in particular for children aged 0-3, in line with the Barcelona targets. But in the context of the ageing population, urgent actions and commitments are needed also to guarantee a suitable level of care provision for dependants other than children, in order to avoid the withdrawal of workers, in particular women, from the labour market.

It will also be important that Member States promote adequate parental leave schemes, shared by both parents. It is particularly important to facilitate men's opportunities to take up leave by developing financial and other incentives.

It is of the utmost importance to promote flexible work arrangements with a view to facilitate reconciliation of professional and private life for both men and women. Special attention should be paid to actions directed towards men in order to promote a change of workplace culture in support of gender equality. In all these actions the role of the social partners will be fundamental.

To meet the challenge of an ageing society, Europe needs to mobilise people to enter the labour market and to create policies to further promote women's employment in all age brackets but in particular in the older ages, and to fully utilise the female employment potential among immigrants. Increasing women's labour market participation, which will not only strengthen the financial sustainability of pension systems, but also allow women to become economically independent and earn better pensions of their own.

HOW CAN THE EUROPEAN UNION BE AN EFFECTIVE PARTNER IN THE PROMOTION OF GENDER EQUALITY AT GLOBAL LEVEL?

The European Union is an active partner in the global effort to promote gender equality. The EU is committed to ensuring that economic and social progress go hand in hand in its internal and external policies.

The EU is working in the western Balkans and with its new neighbours - in Northern Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe - to support countries to move closer to EU standards, including equality between women and men.

The achievement of gender equality is a precondition for eradicating poverty. Over the last ten years we have seen significant progress in the social, economic and political status of women in developing countries. There has been an increase in the enrolment of girls in primary and secondary education and in the quality of health care for women. The female labour force has grown in almost all the regions of the world.

The countries where positive changes have taken place are characterised by strong political commitment towards increasing women's involvement in decision-making. Women parliamentarians have had significant impact in some critical areas: raising violence against women as a political issue; enhancing women's awareness of their existing rights through civic education;

facilitating social legislation on issues such as divorce, child custody, domestic violence and reproductive health and rights.

In spite of major achievements with respect to gender equality and women's rights there are remaining challenges in virtually every area where there have been improvements. This calls for putting continued efforts into new appropriate strategies and actions that can work better.

Gender equality in development co-operation must be considered as a goal in itself. We have to recognise its central role with respect to poverty reduction, governance, human rights and social and human development. The coincidence of the 10th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Review of the Millennium Development Goals will provide us with a unique opportunity to build closer links between the two processes. There cannot be eradication of poverty without the full implementation of the Beijing Platform for Actions.

We need to strengthen our common effort and we need to dedicate adequate resources to the implementation of the Platform if we want to be achieve equality between women and men.