

49th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women

Review of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the
Outcome of the 23rd Special Session of the General Assembly

High Level Plenary Debate

Statement by the European Commission
on behalf of the European Community

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Madame Chair

The European Commission is pleased to join the Member States of the European Unionth and all Member States of the United Nations, in this commemoration of the 10th Anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action.

In line with the statement made by Luxembourg on behalf of the European Union, we reaffirm our unequivocal support for the Beijing Platform for Action, and our firm commitment to all of its objectives.

Equal rights for women and men are beyond dispute. The overriding purpose of this session is to accelerate the full enjoyment and unhindered exercise of those rights for women all over the world.

Exactly six months before the High Level Meeting to review the implementation of the Millennium Declaration, this session comes at a strategic moment. There is no doubt that the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the pursuit of all the internationally agreed development goals are mutually supportive processes. The guaranteeing of women's equal rights, and equal access to resources, is a prerequisite for the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals. Poverty will not be reduced, and sustainable development will not take root, without the realisation of equality between women and men.

Madame Chair, many Member States of the European Union which have spoken over the past week have put to you their assessments of national progress towards gender equality. I would like to illustrate the added value brought to this national dimension by the European Union itself, and to focus on the contribution made by the European Commission to achieving progress towards gender equality, both within the Union and in partnership with developing countries.

We owe a lot to the Beijing Platform. With its twin principles of gender mainstreaming combined with specific actions to achieve equality, it has both informed and transformed our policy approach in many fields. In the European Union we have seen this transformation in areas as diverse as education, research, environment, employment and social welfare, and development co-operation.

The European Commission's integrated approach to gender equality has been based on a combination of legislative proposals, gender mainstreaming tools, and positive actions backed up by specific financial instruments.

Our starting point is legislation. Over the years, the fundamental principle of equality between women and men, enshrined in the EU Treaty, has been reinforced by a range of legislation on equal pay, maternity and parental leave, equal treatment in the labour market and equal access to goods and services.

The transposition of this 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.

Our challenge and responsibility now is to ensure effective implementation of these laws. The EU is fully committed to ensuring that all its Member States have adequate capacity in place to fulfil their obligations arising from the legislation. This process involves the engagement of multiple actors - civil society, citizens, NGOs, social partners, research institutes, the judiciary and administration.

Legislation is fundamental, but alone it is not enough.

Gender equality and effective gender mainstreaming require political commitment from the highest level downwards. That is why the universal reaffirmation issued on Friday is so important. We need to set clear goals and objectives, as was done at the global level in Beijing. We need to put in place targeted policies and actions. We need to monitor our progress with statistics and indicators. Monitoring and review, as the theme of this session of the CSW testifies, are not mere technical exercises. They are the key to securing accountability and showing that we stand by our promises.

High level political commitment to gender equality in the EU has gone well beyond declarations of broad intent. Our heads of state and government have directly addressed the need to empower women in the economy, for example, by fixing an employment rate objective for women of at least 60% by 2010; they have also committed to a concrete target for childcare provision.

The European Union has also been building a base of comparable and reliable statistics. We now have sets of core indicators in three key areas: on women in the economy, on women in decision-making and for the monitoring of violence against women. These indicators are used to assess progress both in relation to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, and internally within the EU. Starting last year, annual reports on equality between women and men in the EU have been submitted to our heads of state and government for their review and action.

As a result we have started to see concrete progress, as well as a growing consensus on the central contribution of women to the achievement of a dynamic economy based on more and better jobs, to higher standards of living and to a better quality of life.

Women's employment rate has steadily increased in the Union. It now stands at 55%. Women account for 7 out of the 11 million new jobs created in Europe from 1997 to 2002. The gap in unemployment rates is narrowing.

However, substantial gender gaps persist in employment status, pay levels, sharing family and work responsibility, and career perspectives. Women are still more vulnerable to poverty than men.

The European Union is responding to a number of these challenges with what we call "reconciliation policies". Responses under development include more childcare facilities, flexible working time arrangements, as well as provisions for part-time work and parental leave. We are, however, also aware of the risk that these policies can perpetuate gender stereotypes because they are still perceived as being chiefly addressed towards women. A major challenge is to encourage men to share family and household responsibilities equally with women.

Madame Chair, the European Union is also a leading partner in the global effort to promote gender equality. The EU is committed to ensuring that political, economic and social progress goes hand in hand in its external as well as its internal policies.

Over the last ten years we have seen significant progress in the social, economic and political status of women in many of our partner countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. There is no question that the most impressive positive changes have taken place in countries where there is strong leadership and political commitment towards gender equality.

In the field of education and health - including HIV/AIDS where the European Commission has played a recognised leadership role - significant improvements have been made in the enrolment of girls in primary and secondary education and in the quality of health care for women.

In spite of these and other achievements with respect to gender equality and women's rights, substantial challenges remain in virtually every area. These challenges call for accelerated and intensified action to bridge outstanding gaps in terms of women's civil, political and economic independence, including through better access to sexual and reproductive health care and services. The challenge of unlocking the full potential of women to make global development sustainable is difficult for many reasons. We as donors of assistance need to continue to improve our way of doing business; partner countries need to embrace social and political reforms which can be as delicate as they are demanding.

None of these challenges can be allowed to dampen our determination. On this 10th Anniversary of Beijing, the European Commission – in collaboration with all the EU Member States - is therefore proud today to declare its commitment to renewing and enhancing its efforts to further the cause of gender equality both in the EU, and in the rest of the world.

Thank you