



BELGIUM

54th Commission on the Status of Women " Beijing +15"

H.E. Mr. Pascal Smet, Flemish Minister for Education, Youth and Equal Opportunities

Dear chairperson, distinguished representatives, ladies and gentlemen,

Firstly, Belgium aligns itself with the statement made on behalf of the European Union.

Belgium reaffirms its unconditional support to the implementation of the Beijing Platform of Action. Belgium also looks forward to participating in other important events organized by the United Nations, that focus on women's rights and women's empowerment, such as the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the CEDAW convention, the ECOSOC Annual ministerial review focusing on the gender-millennium development goals in July, as well as the 10th anniversary of the UN Security Council resolution 1325 on the women, peace and security in October.

For the past few years, Belgian efforts have been concentrating on strengthening our institutional mechanisms in order to promote gender equality. This priority is illustrated by the existence of the Commission on Women and Development and of the Council for Equal opportunities between women and men, as well as by the creation of the Institute for the Equality between Women and Men in 2002 and the Walloon Council for the equality between men and women in 2003, as well as by the support granted to the women's umbrella organizations.

Furthermore, in 2007 and 2008 all the Belgian levels of governance underwent an in-depth reform of their anti-discrimination legislation in order to improve the protection of individuals against all forms of discrimination. This reform is accompanied by information seminars and campaigns at the federal, regional and community level. These reforms led to the creation of 13 anti-discrimination focal points in the Flemish region.

Most of our governing bodies have developed ambitious instruments aiming to mainstream gender aspects into all policies, by applying strict legislative measures and policy action plans. However, it is still a challenge to increase awareness amongst politicians and civil servants of the necessity to change existing practices and improve governance at all levels.

I would like to share with you two good practices. In order to tackle the persistent gender pay gap, we have been monitoring the nationwide pay gap since 2006. These annual reports support the authorities in taking appropriate measures. On the other hand our online check list helps employers to use classify non-sexist job descriptions.

In 1999 Belgium adopted a law putting gender equality at the heart of our development cooperation activities. In 2010, Belgium will dedicate 0.7% of its GDP to development cooperation. Within the framework of this firm commitment, there is a clear political will to increase the investment in gender equality and women's empowerment. Based on the OECD-DAC gender policy marker, we estimate that in 2008, 60% of our development cooperation budget was gender "responsive" - compared to 50 % in 2007.

For one year, Belgium has had a national action plan implementing UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, implementing actions of all ministries involved.

The Belgian action plan for the period 2008-2010 on the fight against violence against women also illustrates the efficient coordination of numerous actions by all Belgian actors and we are ready to share our multidisciplinary methodology.

Our country also pays attention to the build-up of specific expertise regarding sexual and reproductive health and rights. Our expert service-centre Sensoa concentrates on sexual health and HIV/AIDS in Flanders; the web site www.bougetapomme.be financed by the French Community lists referral centers for youngsters and professionals of all sexual orientations.

However, we are by far not there yet! The main difficulty we are facing remains the lack of awareness and commitment of most decision-makers, members of Parliament, civil servants, social partners and citizens. When it comes down to giving priority to gender equality, in order to guarantee long-lasting economic growth and well-being in our societies, we are too often facing this question within a restricted circle of confidants and it is hard to overcome this concern.

Let us therefore scale up our actions to make all actors in society conscious of this priority, by emphasizing the need for gender training of teachers and civil servants. It is urgent to take up this challenge in this period of unprecedented financial crisis. Any reduction of the means dedicated to the field of gender equality or to actions leading to the implementation of the Beijing Platform of Action, is not acceptable. This obstacle has to be overcome, moreover in the light of the creation of the new UN gender entity. This new gender entity should not only have a vast mandate but also have appropriate financial and human resources to ensure its efficiency.

I thank you for your attention.