



Speech by Thorbjørn Jagland,
Secretary General of the Council of Europe
Opening of the first meeting
of the Gender Equality Commission
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Deputy Minister,
Ambassadors,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Some years ago, many of us looked to the 21st Century as the century of progress. We could now say that the 21st Century is, so far, dramatically failing to meet our expectations. In fact, we should rather admit that WE are failing to live up to our own commitments.

The 20th Century was a century of discovery in many aspects, but the most important lesson humanity learnt was that guaranteeing human dignity, freedom and equality were pre-requisites to any meaningful progress and, obviously, to sustainable peace. This lesson cost us millions of lives. We thought it was learnt forever. And yet; Political speeches here and there undermine the importance of human rights. Migrants, Roma people and other minorities have become the target of hate speech, racism and intolerance. Homophobia is on the increase in some countries.

Access to basic rights is becoming increasingly difficult for children, people with disabilities and the elderly who are also paying a heavy toll for the austerity measures in many countries. Women continue to earn less, decide less, and count less than men. There is one area where women count more than men: in the records of victims of violence.

You are here to discuss gender equality and, in particular, how to bridge the gap between the many – excellent - standards we have tried to set, and our reality in the 21st Century. If I have referred to the broader human rights picture, it is because I am convinced that achieving gender equality will also help us to address many other challenges in the field of human rights. We simply can't afford to exclude half of the population from the efforts that we should undertake to achieve social and economic progress and to guarantee lasting peace.

My ambition as Secretary General of the Council of Europe has been to increase the relevance and the efficiency of this Organisation so that it can better serve its important mission. When it comes to the Gender Equality field, this implies reassessing priorities, adapting working methods and mobilising all our resources in the most efficient way.

Within the next two years, I expect the following results:

- First, the Gender Equality perspective should be integrated in virtually all Council of Europe areas of work;
- Second, member States should report progress in the implementation of standards thanks to the support and expertise mobilised through the Gender Equality Commission and the new Network of Focal Points;
- Third, the Council of Europe should further develop its co-operation with our partner Organisations, in particular the EU, UN-Women and OSCE. I hope we will be also able to offer our support to countries in the neighbouring regions that so request;
- Fourth, we should witness the entry into force of the Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence;

- Fifth, Council of Europe standards and results should be more visible and accessible so that we can increase their impact;
- Finally, I want to be able to report on progress of gender equality also within the Secretariat.

To achieve these objectives, the work of the Gender Equality Commission is of vital importance. Our expectations are indeed high, but I have already taken some important measures to contribute to the success of our joint effort. For instance:

- As a result of the restructuring of the secretariat, a Division of gender equality and violence against women has been set up, bringing together very motivated and qualified people;
- An inter-secretariat gender mainstreaming team has been created with colleagues from all Council of Europe sectors;

- Trainings have been launched for members of the secretariat to develop an understanding on gender mainstreaming and gender equality issues;
- information sessions will be organised this Autumn to support the role of gender rapporteurs appointed in the various steering committees.

New ideas and proposals will certainly come out of your discussions these days that I shall be happy to consider how to support them with the resources at my disposal.

I am convinced that we have created the conditions for a successful transversal programme. I am very pleased to note that the Albanian Chairmanship of our Committee of Ministers has included the promotion of gender equality and the support to the work of this Commission amongst its priorities.

Article 1 of the Council of Europe Statute reads as follows:

“The aim of the Council of Europe is to achieve a greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realising the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitating their economic and social progress.”

Let us make sure that women fully benefit from and participate in this enterprise. For the sake of us all.