



Speech by Snežana Samardžić-Marković
Director General of Democracy
Council of Europe
"COMBATING GENDER STEREOTYPES IN AND THROUGH EDUCATION"
Helsinki, 9-10 October 2014

Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

- I have the exceptional pleasure to welcome you all to the Conference on "Combating gender stereotypes in and through education". Why is it so exceptional? Because of the venue. Not only is the city of Helsinki beautiful, but Finland is a pioneering country and a model for many of us in the area of gender equality: it is the first country in the world to have given women both right to vote and to stand for elections; it is a country where women are strongly involved in shaping society at all levels – including education, the topic of our Conference.
- It is also a pleasure for me to welcome you to this Conference, as it is the second annual thematic Conference that the Council of Europe organises for the Network of Focal Points on Gender Equality since the setting up of the Gender Equality Transversal programme in 2012. The first one took place in July 2013 in Amsterdam on "Media and the Image of Women". The very aim of these annual thematic events is to enhance the implementation of the Council of Europe excellent standards, to focus on *de facto* equality through exchange of experience and good practice. And, I am convinced there will be a lot to share.
- Gender stereotyping presents a serious obstacle to the achievement of real gender equality and feeds into gender discrimination. And, gender inequalities are a persistent feature of the education system in Council of Europe member states. At the same time, education has enormous potential to promote gender equality and fight against gender stereotyping – to change mind-sets.

- Education is the gateway that all boys and girls must go through to succeed. Learning helps them to become independent, assertive and to contribute to society with their true and full potential.
- Education is especially important for girls and women. Women's empowerment and progress in relation to gender equality has kept pace with the opportunities offered to girls through education. And, sadly the opposite is equally true: girls with little or no education are far more likely to be married as children, suffer violence and abuse, and have less say over their own life compared to better-educated peers. This does not only harm them individually – it also harms our societies.
- If progress is visible in terms of girls' and women's educational attainments, gender stereotypes are still an intrinsic trait of our societies, and gender gaps persist in many areas, maintaining women and men in their traditional roles. Successes that girls and young women enjoy in education are not equally converted into post-education opportunities, as evidenced by the pay gap which still exists for women, their level of domestic responsibility and their under-representation in decision-making and senior management positions.
- The evaluation of the implementation of the Council of Europe's 2007 Committee of Ministers Recommendation on gender mainstreaming in education shows that seven years after its adoption, the strategy of gender mainstreaming throughout the education system has not been fully implemented in most of the member states, in spite of all laws and policies put in place.
- More generally, we note that in many instances, the school learning environments (intentionally or unintentionally) reinforce patriarchal systems rather than challenging them and tend towards reinforcing gender stereotypes. Let me give you some examples:
- Schools still tend to educate in ways that conform to gender stereotypes, and the majority of school learning environments do not encourage subject choices in ways that are gender neutral. For instance, boys are still less likely to take subjects like psychology or literature which tend to be considered as "girls' subjects", and for the same reasons girls are less likely to opt for physics or economics. Without the intervention of teachers to encourage pupils to choose optional subjects that suit their interests and career aspirations, adolescents will not want to appear different from their peers and are unlikely to challenge traditional gendered choices. The same applies to extra-curricular activities.

- The findings of a Council of Europe Survey¹ overwhelmingly tell us that teachers (both male and female) interact differently with boys and girls: for instance, boys receive a disproportionate percentage of all teacher-student interactions; boys are praised more often than girls; boys are asked more questions than girls; boys' contributions are more frequently accepted by teachers.
- Also, many of the school textbooks used in European countries include stories and images that reflect a stereotyped portrayal of the role and activities of women and men, boys and girls. Men are still more often represented than women; vocabulary is in contradiction with the principle of gender equality; and the main characters are mostly males.
- Still, we strongly believe that the education system is in fact in a very privileged position to reverse the situation, to change the mind-sets of both girls and boys; women and men, and to play a very crucial role to allow girls and boys to fulfil their true and full potential by avoiding transmitting preconceived ideas about gender roles. True, gender stereotyping is deeply rooted in the school settings and it may be easier said than done to remove it completely; but a clearer understanding of the issue will contribute to ensuring that girls and boys are not made to feel that it is their gender that somehow determines their abilities, goals or achievement levels.

Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

- You have important work to do. You will be called to analyse the role played by the education system in perpetuating gender-based inequalities, the impact of the school system on masculine and feminine identities, parents' role in breaking gender stereotyping the importance of challenging gender stereotypes at pre-school level, as well as the importance and the challenges in implementing the Council of Europe Recommendation on gender mainstreaming in education.
- It is also the occasion for us to present you a compilation of good practices to promote an education free from gender stereotypes, which provides examples of activities that Council of Europe member states are implementing, and suggestions about how to better implement our recommendation on gender mainstreaming in education.

¹ Promoting Gender Mainstreaming in Schools, Council of Europe, 2004

- A lot of expertise and experience is gathered in this room. Let us all benefit from it. Sharing of exchange and good practices is the basis for any guidelines that might be put forward to tackle the issue.
- We rely on your dynamic participation to put forward proposals, draw up conclusions and concrete recommendations on how to enhance our longstanding efforts in the area of combating gender stereotyping in and through education.

The Council of Europe looks forward with great interest to the results of your work. So do the girls and boys in all of our member states.