

**Work-life balance as a leverage for women's empowerment  
and promoting gender equality  
Rome, 12 April 2022**

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I have been designated by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, who was not able to participate, to represent the Organisation at this important event.

Many thanks to the Italian colleagues and institutions, represented especially by Minister Bonetti and State Secretary Della Vedova here present, who worked so hard during the entire period of the Italian Presidency of the Committee of the Ministers of the Council of Europe.

It is a particular pleasure to be here because before the Italian Presidency priorities were revealed, more than a year ago, we did not know exactly what Italy would focus on. Normally the presidencies take on some of the priorities of the previous presidency in order to deepen them and continue them, but when we found out that the fight against violence against women, gender equality and non-discrimination were the priorities, we were really looking forward to the work. And we have not been disappointed.

You have heard from Minister Bonetti and State Secretary Della Vedova that the focus has been multi-fold. I think it is good to recall from the promotion of our Istanbul Convention on the prevention of violence against women, which we celebrate around 25 November, and for which Minister Bonetti was in Strasbourg and which is an important event for us, then to the event during the Commission for the Status of Women on STEM and girls and their access to STEM subjects, and now to this event today.

As you know, the Council of Europe is an Organisation that sets standards. It has the ability and the convening power to prepare not only recommendations, soft law, but also hard law conventions that bind the member States to certain objectives. In this area, the Council of Europe has the full range of standard-setting, monitoring and cooperation capacity which is its great added value. As examples, we have Recommendation No(96)5, a standard which was already quoted, but we also have, through the Social Charter, a way for the Council of Europe to monitor member States obligations - notably implementation of workers' rights. And, of course, we offer to member States policy advice and specific assistance in implementing some of the standards and obligations that they have.

It will be, for us, particularly interesting today to listen to the member States' experiences and advances on this topic. Reconciling work-life balance is probably a moving target. It will be interesting hear the views, successes and failures which have taken place in the member States since the Organisation's recommendation was adopted in 1996. What lessons have we learned? What are the objectives we should set for ourselves for the future? This is going to be particularly valuable for us, as the Council of Europe will soon begin work on the priorities of the next gender equality strategy that will be the basis of our work for the next few years.

Today we have three sessions and we will have the privilege of listening to some ministers, so we will have the States' point of view, but we will also have a session with employers with the perspective from the workplace. We will also have a session on the impact of Covid. It has been an extremely powerful "revealer" of so many things that do not work, but possibly because of that, it will help us also to understand what can work and what we can learn from this crisis, and that States need to consider improving the situation for allowing women the choice, not having to be forced into a choice.

With Minister Bonetti, we will take advantage of this day's wealth of work and insight to prepare some takeaways which will help you and us in the future to see what kind of recommendations or stimulus we can use and to take them further. Towards the end of the day, we will come back to you with the shared conclusions and shared takeaways for the future. These could go to the Gender Equality Commission of the Council of Europe, but also further to the Committee of Ministers and to member states to consider.

I also want, of course, to mark the importance of our work even more so whilst the tragedy of Ukraine is unfolding. I think we owe it to the women and girls who are suffering in impossible situations that we continue the work, that we continue to focus as we are doing on the fundamental problems that women have, even though it seems absurd that we sit in Rome in this beautiful setting and discuss this. But I think we owe it to those women and girls to continue our focus and concentration on such important priorities for the women and girls, for the men and boys, and for peace on the continent.

I wish us very fruitful discussions and work.