



**Remarks by Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni,
Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe
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Minister, distinguished guests,

I congratulate the Finnish authorities for hosting this Conference.

From the outset of their Presidency of the Committee of Ministers, they have been clear about the priority they place on equality and women's rights.

That is quite right.

Because the quest for equality between all women and men goes to the heart of the Council of Europe's mandate.

Over the years our Organisation has done so much in this respect.

Of the standards that we have set, three landmark treaties stand out.

The 1950 European Convention on Human Rights outlawed discrimination regarding the rights it set out in law – and its Protocol 12 later made the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sex an explicit, stand-alone right.

The 1961 version of the European Social Charter already proclaimed women's right to equal pay.

And the 2011 Istanbul Convention represents a crucial breakthrough in preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

To date, 34 countries have ratified this treaty.

It seeks to prevent gender-related violence, to protect those who become its victims, and to prosecute those who perpetrate these crimes.

The Istanbul Convention recognises that gender-based violence is the ultimate form of sexism, standing in the way of true equality.

We are proud of it, and rightly so.

But these three important treaties are only the tip of the iceberg.

Over the years the Council of Europe has adopted a range of measures aimed at empowering women, tackling discrimination, combating harassment and sexual exploitation, and so on and so forth.

In this way, we have played a leading role in the clear progress that has been made.

Across our member states, women have never had as much autonomy, economic power or political influence as they have today:

This is progress – but not equality.

In each of these areas there remains a stubborn gender gap – and this we must address.

We can only do that if we get to the heart of the matter: if we confront the fundamental causes of the disparity and discrimination that remain with us.

Gender stereotypes and sexism engrain the attitudes that inhibit, intimidate and dissuade people – most often women – from making their voices heard, standing up for their rights, and making the career choices to which they are entitled and from which our societies would benefit.

This age-old problem is a shape-shifting phenomenon.

As our modern world evolves, it takes different forms, undermining our potential in new and unwelcome ways.

The online environment serves all too often as a forum for sexist hate speech, cyber-stalking and faceless misogyny.

New industries, including the tech sector, are dominated by one gender to the exclusion of another, as so many fields have in the past.

And in some of our member states the rise of populist politics has been accompanied by a gender backlash.

So here at this Conference, can we come up with the new ideas, create the new synergies, and forge the national and international links that will help eradicate the harmful effects of gender stereotyping and sexist attitudes of all kinds?

The Council of Europe stands with you and is ready to act.

Indeed, we have already begun.

Our second and current Gender Equality Strategy places the prevention and combating of gender stereotypes and sexism as its first stated aim.

It also adopts a holistic, integrated and multi-sectoral approach, helping member states to meet our commonly agreed standards through policies and practices that make a real difference.

But the big news from this week is that our Committee of Ministers yesterday adopted a new Recommendation on preventing and combating sexism.

This includes the first ever international definition of sexism.

It calls on our member states to take their activities to a new level with measures that counter sexist hate speech, promote gender inclusive and gender sensitive language, and ensure the equal presence of women and men in visual representations and other contexts too.

It also asks those member states to tackle sexist hate speech on the internet and social media, to promote equality in the workplace, and to eradicate sexism across the public sector: in justice, in education, and culture and sport and beyond.

Political will, legislative measures, and non-legislative tools will all be needed.

And a system of member states' self-monitoring, backed by regular reporting to the Council of Europe's Gender Equality Commission, is designed to provide a virtuous cycle of peer pressure that supports national authorities in making progress.

This is our approach, but we have no monopoly on wisdom.

So while our Recommendation addresses each of the three session topics that you will discuss today and tomorrow, I am equally keen to hear from you whether we are on the right track.

Can our methods be improved?

Let me give you some examples.

This afternoon you will debate the challenge of countering stereotypical forces at work and in the public space.

I think that this is something that most – if not every – woman will recognise.

Our Recommendation is clear.

Labour laws must ban sexism in the workplace.

Women must have recourse to remedy where discrimination is shown to have taken place.

And the glass ceiling that prevents women from taking their place among the decision-makers in public life and private enterprise alike must be broken, once and for all – including through the use of temporary special measures such as targets and quotas.

In this, the public sector should lead by example.

The same is true of course when it comes to the principle of equal pay for equal work.

On this there has been too little progress for far too long.

In EU member states, national pay gaps can still be up to 20% - and there is no correlation with a country's economic power.

So should progress on closing the pay gap perhaps be used as one measure of success in tackling gender stereotyping and sexism? I wonder.

Tomorrow morning you will discuss violence, sexual harassment and sexist hate speech as the manifestations of the harmful effects of gender stereotypes.

Building on the work of the Istanbul Convention, our Recommendation recognises that hostile, degrading and humiliating environments constitute a particular kind of violence:

One that demeans women, lowers their self-esteem and restricts their activities or choices.

The sexist behaviour that facilitates this is often the precursor to sexual abuse and violence, rape or other physical harm.

Education against stereotyping, bullying and sexist insults; the introduction of effective complaints mechanisms; and the criminalisation of sexist hate speech as a form of defamation:

These are the among the measures we propose to change our culture, and to prevent and protect against violence and harassment in their many, insidious guises.

But are they the right ones – and do they go far enough?

Finally, tomorrow afternoon you will consider the challenge of tackling gender stereotypes and sexist images online and in the media.

On this, our Recommendation calls for: campaigns on the dangers and opportunities, and the rights and responsibilities, related to the use of new media; a ban on sexism in media and advertising; and measures to encourage those industries to self-regulate, taking defined steps to promote the non-stereotypical portrayal of women and men.

We also point out that Artificial Intelligence poses a particular challenge – because the use of algorithms can transmit and reinforce stereotypes, from the articles recommended for reading to the job opportunities that are brought to our attention.

Member states are therefore urged to integrate a gender equality perspective in all policies, programmes and research related to AI.

After all, artificial Intelligence must not replicate the mistakes of our past.

Instead, it should help ensure a future in which gender gaps are closed and sexism is eliminated.

Friends, it is easy to dwell on the fact that change comes more slowly than we would like it.

After all, gender discrimination is an abuse of human rights and the time to end it is always now.

But we must not lose sight of the degree of change that we have witnessed in a historically short time, nor the opportunity that we have here and now.

The MeToo movement has changed the environment in which these issues are discussed.

You can hear its echo in initiatives such as our Parliamentary Assembly's NotInMyParliament campaign to counter sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments.

But, more importantly, you can detect that change of mood in the media, in the workplace, and on the streets of our towns and villages.

Yes, there is opposition, but so too is there momentum.

Gender stereotypes and sexism are wrong.

So together, let's take the next steps forward: the prize is ours to win.