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**“Tackling gender stereotypes and sexism”
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Preliminary draft report
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Introduction

“Today sexism is endemic, tomorrow is up to us”.

- Kat Banyard, Founder of UK Feminista

Sexism is rife in all areas of life across Europe. Deep-seated patterns of stereotypes and discrimination limit the potential of men and women, as people make big and small decisions based, not on facts, but on biased assumptions. As a result, gender (among other markers of difference) to a large degree determines a person’s choice of education and career, participation in sports and other interests, access to resources and leadership positions as well as degree of care responsibilities and hours of unpaid work. As such, stereotypes limit men and women’s roles, constricting the development of their natural talents and strengths, their educational and professional opportunities and experiences. Sexism and stereotypes inhibit people, most often women, from making their voices heard and making career choices for which they are entitled to and from which our society would benefit. Sexism is one of the reasons why progress in gender equality laws, policies and practices is still to result in fully fledged equality at the structural, cultural and personal levels. The existence of sexism shows that there is an urgent need to confront the underlying causes of discrimination and disparity, often hidden in plain sight.

The Conference on *Tackling gender stereotypes and sexism* brought together policy-makers and practitioners from across various sectors and across Europe to share experiences in tackling sexism and bias. This report outlines key discussions of the conference, particularly foregrounding examples of best practices from the public sector, private companies and civil society organisations showcased at the conference. The conference coincided with the adoption, on 27 March 2019, of the *Recommendation Rec(2019)1 to Member States on Preventing and Combating Sexism* by the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers. This report will make recommendations on how this instrument can be put into practice and provides specific examples that can serve as inspiration for designing similar initiatives in other countries.

Defining sexism

Recommendation Rec(2019)1 defines sexism as *“any act, gesture, visual representation, spoken or written words, practice of behaviour based upon the idea that a person or a group of persons is inferior because of their sex, which occurs in the public or private sphere, whether online or offline, with the purposes or effect of:*

- I. *violating the inherent dignity or rights of a person or a group of persons; or*
- II. *resulting in physical, sexual, psychological or socio-economic harm or suffering to a person or group of persons; or*
- III. *creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment; or*
- IV. *constituting a barrier to the autonomy and full realisation of human rights by a person or a group of persons; or*
- V. *maintaining and reinforcing gender stereotypes”*

We all observe the world around us continuously and make assumptions about all the things we have incomplete information about. Assumptions help us make decisions about things that affect us, ranging from what we might have for lunch, which route to take on our way to work or which career to pursue. Assumptions become problematic, however, when we make them about other people based on deep seated stereotypes based on a person's gender, age, race, sexual orientation, or ability. This is unconscious bias that is ingrained in our thought patterns, institutions, social structures and cultures. We are surrounded and influenced by stereotypes from an early age, in all areas of life, be it the differential treatment of girls and boys from infancy, differences in career choice recommended to male and female students, different opportunities to participate in sports, or the unequal representation of men and women media and entertainment. Stereotypes are both a cause and a consequence of sexism and gender inequality.

Gender stereotypes typically function as opposites, e.g. strong-weak; at the heart of which is a divide in power. Powerful and positive traits are typically seen as masculine, whereas negative and passive traits are associated with femininity. As a result, people are judged differently for the same behaviour depending on their gender. Women in leadership roles, for example, are often faced with the "likeability" challenge. Furthermore, not only are men deemed more suitable for powerful positions, male is also deemed as neutral. Policies, businesses and even artificial intelligence systems are built on the assumption that the default citizen, worker or user is (white, straight) male. Finally, there are penalties for both men and women for breaking the stereotypes, and as such also men suffer from strict gender roles. The imbalance of power in society mean, however, that women and gender minorities suffer from systemic discrimination and sexism. This demonstrates that stereotypes and discrimination are not just based on individual biased assumptions but build on unequal structures of power.

Sexism results in deeply unequal outcomes in all areas of life. In the world of work, sexist stereotypes and discrimination result in the glass ceiling, the persistent gender pay gap across industries and sectors, and sexual harassment in the workplace. Sexism is rife in schools. According to a survey of secondary schools in the UK, for example, a quarter of all secondary teachers witness stereotyping in school on a daily basis. Sexist language was rife; so was sexual harassment (UK Feminista: *"It's just everywhere"* A study on sexism in schools and how to tackle it). More broadly, there is an epidemic of gender-based violence in our societies across Europe with phenomenally low reporting and conviction rates.

Sexism is also reflected in women's low representation in politics and the obstacles they face in their attempts to work effectively as elected representatives: the Parliamentary Assembly has surveyed MPs and their staff on sexism in European parliaments. The findings point to the existence of sexist attitudes and abuse in democratic institutions: 85% of MPs had experienced psychological violence against them, 58% had been abused online, 67% had had comments made about their physical appearance.

Furthermore, sexism is particularly harmful to people who do not conform to strict binary definitions of gender, as reflected by the violence and other hate crimes suffered by anyone challenging gender norms and stereotypes whether it is because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Finally, sexism, gender stereotypes and discrimination have pervasive impacts on people's image of themselves, their self-esteem and mental health

Key challenges in tackling sexism

Sexism is a difficult problem to tackle because it relies on stereotypes that seems so natural, inequalities that are hidden in plain sight. Gender identity and gender relations are experienced at a deeply personal level. This makes gender equality different from many other policy areas: it is a lived reality for all of us. We can probably all name an instance when we have experienced gender discrimination, sexism or at least when we were at the receiving end of ill-conceived stereotypes.

Preventing and combating sexism thus begin at the personal level: we should all become more aware of our own thinking patterns and identify potential bias and attempt to address the blind spots that still exist in our gender equality work. For example, to fully tackle sexism, we need to consider how we could move from a strictly binary conception of gender towards privileging a more nuanced or complex understandings. Or how we could give space for those voices that are currently underrepresented in gender equality policy making in our countries and organisations.

Tackling gender stereotypes is highly political, as it involves countering entrenched power relations, such as challenging and countering large industries and powerful companies that make huge profits from sexist imagery or the sexual exploitation of women, whether in the global pornography industry or major social media companies. On the other hand, sexism cannot be countered unless we tackle the division of labour (and of power) in the home, in particular the division of reproductive work. What happens in the private sphere and how care work is divided has implications for the prospects of parliamentarians, journalists and filmmakers, to name a few. And one of the most pervasive repercussions of the unequal division of care work is of course the perpetuation of stereotypical gender norms from one generation to the next.

Today, gender equality advocates in Europe are more so confronted with a much tougher challenge than that of designing appropriate policies and implementation mechanisms. Conference participants raised concerns about an ongoing, systemic undermining of achieved gains in gender equality, and in human rights and human dignity more generally. This aspect of the political environment in which we work will mean that there will be considerable push back on many of the initiatives that we have identified during this conference. At this time, it is important to support and nurture Europe-wide networks that pool expertise and build alliances for battling sexism. It is furthermore important to ensure that these networks are as inclusive and intersectional as possible.

Tackling sexism: learning from good practices

The Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers has taken an important step by adopting the *Recommendation on Preventing and Combating Sexism*. The conference brought together experts from different sectors from across Europe to share their experiences with policies and practices to tackle stereotypes, discrimination and sexism and to inform ways in which Member States can begin to put the Recommendation into practice. The good practices can be grouped into three broad categories:

- (i) raising awareness and changing attitudes,
- (ii) creating an enabling environment, and
- (iii) regulation and legislation.

In this section we will give an overview of several good practices within each category that can serve as inspiration for designing similar initiatives in other countries.

Raising awareness and changing mindsets

Initiatives to raise awareness and to change mindsets about gender roles and relations are an integral part of the toolkit in fighting sexism. Such initiatives have a place in schools, workplaces, political institutions and in the media. UK Feminista, for example, is training new teachers and providing continuing training for existing teachers on sexist attitudes and sexual harassment in schools. They have developed template strategies for the classroom that can be downloaded by teachers. Companies like Pfizer train their employees with unconscious bias training. Pfizer provides workshops for managers showing what it means to be biased and follows up on the training by monitoring evolutions in the working environment and tracking any progress.

Another important form of training that can change attitudes is the motivational and skills training and mentoring offered to women who want to progress in their professional lives. In their attempt to improve the gender balance of managers in local government, the German cities of Frankfurt and Wuppertal organised motivational workshops for women who would like to advance to management level (in addition to providing unconscious bias training for selection committees). Pfizer has developed mentoring programmes for female staff members, as well as facilitated membership in a business women's association for access to tools and networks. The Belgian Union of Journalists has provided media coaching for female experts in a drive to improve the gender balance of experts interviewed by journalists.

There have also been important examples recently of campaigns that aim to change attitudes in society at large. The most well-known is perhaps #MeToo, whose ripple effects can be seen all over the world, in the global mobilisation of women to tackle sexism and harassment but also the backlash that many women have faced when they have made abuse visible. Other examples of more specific campaigns is the Not in My Parliament campaign, as well as the Russian “Sexist of the year” anti-award for sexist content in the media, advertising, and policy. Publicising sexist language like this makes more visible and questionable. The publicity of the anti-award raises public awareness about sexist language.

Creating an enabling environment for gender equality

While changing attitudes and mindsets among men and women, girls and boys, is important for tackling sexism, it is also important to take more concrete steps to change structures and institutions for an environment that is more conducive to gender equality. Ending sexism should not be seen as the responsibility of individual men or women. There are three issues that determine whether an environment is fertile ground for sexism and abuse or for the development of equitable gender relations: violence/security, representation, and workplaces with coherent approaches to gender.

First, ending harassment and the threat of violence are central for making schools, workplaces and communities better places for men and women. It is particularly important to be able to provide a discrimination and violence free educational experience to all girls and boys, irrespective of their ethnicity, religion, ability, sexual orientation or gender identity. The threat of violence and abuse is continuously keeping women and sexual and gender minorities from pursuing their goals, participating in public discussion and decision making as well as online communities on an equal footing with (straight) men. On the other hand, gender stereotypes make particularly young men, often from marginalised backgrounds, also vulnerable to crime and interpersonal violence.

Second, representation matters for gender relations and for sexism. When we see women in different sectors of society, working successfully at all levels, more women are likely to follow suit and will face fewer obstacles in their way. It is particularly important to be able to see women from diverse backgrounds in senior positions in business, culture, politics and administration. Representation of men in previously women-dominated sectors and industries, including unpaid care work in families, is equally important. Quotas can be helpful, even necessary, in situations where women’s lack of representation feeds negative stereotypes which again in turn keep representation low, but there are other ways in which diverse representation can be improved. It is particularly important to challenge stereotypes about expertise and leadership as inherently male attributes. To improve the representation of women as experts in the media, the Belgian Union of Journalists, for example, developed “Expertalia”, a resource for journalists that provides details of female experts in diverse fields as well as male experts from minority backgrounds. Having more women work as film directors and scriptwriters is likely to result in movies and TV programmes that better represent our diverse societies.

Third, we need workplaces that take tackling gender inequality and sexism seriously. The most important determinant is the extent to which company leadership is driving change forward. Buy-in and motivation at the top is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition to changing attitudes, practices and expectations within organisations, often even over short periods of time. Once the necessary political will exists, there are several tools that companies can use to tackle sexism. The EDGE Certification, for example, measures the gender balance at all levels of the organisation, the gender pay gap, the practices and policies that are in place to ensure equitable careers and employees' ratings of career development opportunities. This provides companies the opportunity to analyse their company from a gender perspective with robust data as well as benchmark against other companies, industries or sectors with the EDGE Certification Global Standard. Many companies have also recognised the branding value of a globally acknowledged certification process.

Tackling stereotypes and sexism in the workplace also requires employers to take employees' care responsibilities into account. German municipalities have made an improved work-life balance, such as employer-provided child care and opportunities to work from home, a key prong in their strategy to improve career opportunities for women. Lack of consideration for care responsibilities does not only hold women back in their careers, but it can significantly lower women's participation in public decision making and representative institutions. A good work-life is moreover good for all employees including parents.

Regulation and legislation

A review of existing legislation across world, conducted by Equality Now, found many areas of discrimination. Some types of discrimination are obvious, such as laws around unequal inheritance, wife obedience, child marriage. There are often much less obviously sexist laws, which are still discriminatory. For example, discriminatory nationality laws perpetuate the stereotype that women belong to their father or husband; parental leave legislation that excludes men reinforces unequal division of care work; and the uneven implementation of equal pay laws imply that women are simply worth a bit less.

A report on legislation on sexual violence in 15 countries across the former Soviet Union, published by Equality Now, found patterns of discriminatory laws across the region. Women are expected to settle rape cases, laws are framed in terms of honour and morality. Focus is often with preserving family honour. In the United Kingdom, men under 25 are likely to be acquitted of rape, often on the grounds that a conviction would ruin their future, that they won't be able to be breadwinners and so on. There is a clear tendency in the course of trials, based on the logic of the defence, to look into the complaining victims' social history and to refer to any evidence of the woman being flirtatious or sexually assertive. If such elements are found, the prosecution wouldn't take the case forward and they know that through stereotypes women with such social history are less likely to get justice. Rape laws tend to require the demonstration of use of additional force, for example through demonstrated injuries. New legislation in Sweden has defined rape as the absence of active consent, rather than through the use of force (see also Istanbul Convention).

Legislative efforts are badly needed, particularly in developing new, well thought through legislation to tackle new phenomena such as cyber stalking or cyber bullying. The omnipresence of connected smart devices in our lives means that sexist crimes take place online at an increasing pace and existing laws and practices are often insufficient to tackle them. Intimate partners or former partners can put individuals under surveillance; cyber stalking can easily escalate and result in physical violence against the victim, including homicide. Cyber-bullying, on the other hand, can be carried out by complete strangers against the “archives” of social media data, such as photos. Extreme instances of cyber bullying have resulted in severe mental illness, including suicide.

Using the Recommendation effectively for changes in policy and practice

The expert presentations and discussions at the conference resulted in a number of recommendations for Gender Equality Commission members and others willing to tackle gender stereotypes and sexism in institutions and communities around them.

1. The importance of **political will and leadership** for change has been stressed throughout. The attitude of those in power, whether in companies, political institutions or civil society and research organisations is reflected across the organisation. It affects how seriously awareness raising, training and certification initiatives are taken. It determines the level of funding and other resources available for organisational reform as well as the commitment behind changes for a better work-life balance.
2. Systematic change in work places and in society **takes time and expertise**. The **availability for funding** makes a central difference for whether attempts to tackle sexism result in systematic changes. Sufficient resources allow, for example, the employment of gender equality focal points (such as across German municipalities), research to build and update an evidence base on stereotypes and sexism, CSO initiatives that raise awareness and improve accountability, as well as matching salaries in female dominated industries with their counterparts in male-dominated (or “neutral”) sectors.
3. Gender equality units and programmes should prioritise their **analysis of stereotypes and unconscious bias**, as well as the political nature of sexism, which undermines many otherwise well thought through initiatives.
4. Stereotypes and sexism intersect with other identities and axes of power, including age, ethnicity and race, ability, sexual orientation and gender identity. All work to tackle sexism should **take intersectionality seriously** and analyse openly the different hidden discriminations and inequalities that mean that sexism is experienced very different by men and women from different backgrounds.

5. International instruments, such as Recommendation Rec(2019)1 or the Istanbul convention, can be very useful for national actors working to **hold governments to account**. Such synergies can be supported through systematic collaboration between different actors on specific aspects of sexism, e.g. in recruitment, media, online, etc.
6. Member States will be expected to **monitor progress** in the implementation of the Recommendation and to report back regularly on measures taken and progress achieved. These monitoring and reporting processes could be harnessed to enable learning, collaboration and accountability both at the country level and at the European level.