

High-level opening by Justina Jakštienė
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Conference „United around gender equality: making space for women and girls“
organised by the Council of Europe under the aegis of the Lithuanian Presidency of the
Committee of Ministers
30 May 2024, Strasbourg, Palais de l'Europe, Room 1

Madam Secretary General, your excellencies, experts, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to open this Conference with the Secretary-General and to address such a distinguished audience of experts and decision-makers.

Last May in Reykjavík, a historic Fourth Council of Europe Summit pledged commitment to protect and promote the cornerstone values: human rights, democracy and the rule of law, while reaffirming solidarity with Ukraine. Lithuania has always been a strong supporter of these values at home and worldwide, and I am proud that the Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers is another opportunity for us to affirm this common commitment.

Gender equality is a fundamental human right. It is not just a women's issue; it is a human issue that affects us all. As the title of this Conference reveals, it should unite us rather than divide us. The spaces we create for women and girls in our societies are a reflection of our values and our vision for the future. These spaces should not be mere tokens of inclusion but platforms for empowerment, where every voice is heard, and every potential is realized.

I see significant progress in the area of gender equality, as a result of high political commitment. Over recent years, numerous legislative and non-legislative measures have been adopted. The Council of Europe, the European Union and the UN have had a great influence on our gender equality and equality policies. I particularly emphasize the significance of the Istanbul Convention, for preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, protection of all women and girls without discrimination, and dismantling prejudices and stereotypes.

Despite not yet ratifying this important human rights instrument, Lithuania has improved assistance for individuals experiencing or having experienced domestic violence. The protection order against domestic violence came into effect on July 1, 2023, and the number of domestic violence reports increased by 2.5 times. From July 2023 to March 2024, the police registered nearly 40 thousand reports of potential domestic violence and issued about 16 thousand orders - on average, in every third call-out for domestic violence cases. This change is encouraging, as individuals at risk of domestic violence are becoming more courageous and aware of where to seek help. In response, state funding for comprehensive assistance to victims of domestic violence has doubled.

Support for victims of sexual violence is being strengthened. Lithuania has established 25 accredited organizations to provide comprehensive assistance to victims of violence, including information, counseling, legal, and psychological services. 3 million and 155 thousand euro are allocated for

financing specialized complex centers for 2024. The National Center for Information on Sexual Violence has been established, providing information about assistance options for victims and their relatives. The "Speak Up" website and increased education investments have empowered victims to seek help for immediate victims and those who have experienced sexual crimes in the past. Inter-institutional cooperation has been established at the national and local levels, with the Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Council and Local-level Domestic Violence Prevention Commissions addressing domestic violence issues and providing assistance. A program for individuals at risk of committing violence in close environments has been developed and approved in 2023, funded by non-governmental organizations. The goal is to transform attitudes, foster emotion recognition, empathy, and identify personal coping strategies for those at risk of committing violence.

During times of crisis and conflict, incidents of sexual violence rise. We must provide support for survivors of sexual and gender-based conflict-related violence in Ukraine at the European level. Last year, Lithuania hosted an international discussion with the participation of the UN high-level representative Pramila Patten focused on effective protection, assistance, and prevention systems for survivors of sexual violence. Efforts need to be made to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions through appropriate legal means. It is crucial to ensure a survivor-centred approach in all responses to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Collective actions and international cooperation are necessary for survivors of sexual violence during war to receive adequate support, empowerment, and successful reintegration into society.

Last year, Lithuania paid considerable attention to the issue of economic violence. We initiated a project aimed at creating a solution model and beginning to address the problem of economic violence by raising awareness and fostering societal intolerance towards all forms of violence. Further initiatives are planned to identify economic violence and provide effective assistance to victims of this type of domestic abuse in the coming years.

The reduction of the gender pay-gap and the promotion of gender balance in decision-making are in the scope of our deliberations. In Lithuania, we are currently transposing the Women on Boards Directive into national law. Our objective is to ensure that persons of the underrepresented gender hold at least 33% of all director positions on boards, including both executive and non-executive roles. To make a more substantial change, we plan to extend the Directive's scope beyond listed companies to encompass large companies in our national legislation.

Preparatory work has recently started for the implementation of the Gender Pay Gap Directive, including a study to assess the factors contributing to the gender pay gap and discussions on recommendations.

The changes that came into effect at the beginning of 2023 – established non-transferable parental leave for both women and men – allow fathers to become more involved in childcare and strengthen family bonds, while mothers wishing to return to the job market can do so sooner. In 2023, 1,340 men took advantage of the non-transferable parental leave.

In Lithuania, according to the National Strategic Management Law, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour coordinates the implementation of the horizontal principle *equal opportunities for all*. All central government institutions are mandated to consider this principle when formulating public policies or drafting regulations. The Ministry monitors progress indicators for the implementation of

this principle, provides consultations and promotes inter-institutional cooperation. In Lithuania, we have strategically aligned documents in both the realms of addressing violence and promoting gender equality. These encompass laws on strategic management, progress plans, action plans, and financing initiatives for non-governmental organizations.

We have to learn the lessons that integrating gender equality into the strategic agenda and further strengthening institutional mechanisms are important steps toward more effective and democratic governance. A commission for equal opportunities for women and men has been established, and its status has been elevated to the level of political representation, in line with CEDAW recommendations. Each year, an action plan is developed, structured according to the EIGE domains, with a focus on areas requiring greater attention.

Despite the significant progress in gender equality, we still face gaps such as stereotypes, insufficient representation of women in political life, and the burden of unpaid care work, which limits time for skill improvement.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are well aware that we still have a lot of work to do since gender equality remains an unfinished agenda.

The new Gender Equality Strategy 2024-2029 with its six strategic areas will guide us towards this important work over the next six years. In our future agenda, we must prioritize the implementation and monitoring of gender equality initiatives, as well as the integration of gender perspectives into forthcoming policies.

Monitoring and evaluating the potentially different impacts of digital and green transitions on women and men is crucial. To achieve this, we need to develop gender-disaggregated administrative data and statistics.

Further steps should be taken to support women's economic empowerment, address gender gaps in caregiving and pensions, combat stereotypes, and develop a comprehensive approach to all forms of violence, including gender-based cyber violence, psychological abuse, economic coercion, and especially multiple discrimination.

Persons with disabilities have the right to protection from any form of discrimination and violence. In particular, we should pay attention to women and girls with disabilities who are two to five times more likely to face violence than other women.

We need to strengthen institutions for gender equality further. Increasing visibility and enhancing leadership at both international and national levels are crucial.

Last but not least, promoting LGBTQ+ advocacy is a catalyst for progressive social change.

Let us continue to make space for women and girls, across genders and generations, to forge a world where equality is not an aspiration but a reality.

Thank you for your commitment.