

## **“Tackling gender stereotypes and sexism” (Helsinki, 28-29 March 2019)**

Madam Deputy Secretary General, dear colleagues and friends,

I have the pleasure to welcome you all to the Conference on “Tackling gender stereotypes and sexism” and also welcome you to this beautiful venue.

This Neo-Renaissance building, House of the Estates, has a long history but now it serves as a venue for meetings and official functions held by the central government and ministries. For example, often the government negotiations take place here –probably again later this spring after our parliamentary elections which are coming in April.

In this conference, we have representatives and gender equality experts from 37 European countries and from Canada, and from various international and non-governmental organisations. It’s wonderful to see you all here today.

At the beginning, some words about Finland. You have probably noticed that for a second year in a row, UN rated Finland as the happiest country in the world in the United Nations World Happiness Report. For us Finns it is a bit hard to digest this excellent result. As we are humble, and sometimes also a bit melancholic, people, we ask, if all this happiness can really be true here. But I hope you are going to enjoy this happiness and happy atmosphere here in this country.

What is the background of this happiness? Many people think that our secret is in our nature, very literally. When others go to therapy, Finns put on a pair of rubber boots and head to the woods or summer cottage. The more primitive circumstances Finns have, the more Finns relax. In addition to nature, I consider welfare society and gender equality to be very important factors contributing to the happiness of Finns - and of our Nordic neighbours too.

Dear guests,

Gender equality is one of the three priorities during our Presidency of the Committee of Ministers in the Council of Europe. This makes me very happy.

Earlier this week we arranged the seventh International Roma Women’s conference “Access to Justice and Rights”. This conference “Tackling Gender Stereotypes and Sexism” will seek to raise awareness of stereotypes in different spheres of life, and share good examples of tackling stereotypes. This event focuses on gender stereotypes and sexism in the context of violence, work and public space, and media.

The theme of this conference builds on the Council of Europe’s Gender Equality Strategy. As an organisation that is specialised in human rights, I believe it is important that the Council of Europe has put effort into raising awareness about gender stereotypes. Stereotypes are still an obstacle to achieving *de facto* equality. They undermine the human rights of both men and women.

Gender stereotypes assign women’s and men’s characteristics and roles, which are determined and limited by their sex. Stereotyping can limit the development of the natural talents and abilities of girls and boys, women and men, their educational and professional preferences and experiences, as well as life opportunities in general. Therefore, gender stereotyping and sexism present a serious obstacle to the achievement of real gender equality.

According to a World Health Organization study from 2017, children adopt stereotypical thinking already when they are pre-teens. The message is the same, no matter how conservative or liberal the country is; girls are vulnerable and boys strong and independent.

We all should constantly question the stereotypes and prejudices we have, however progressive we think we are. I think it is almost impossible for a person to be totally free of stereotypes. As a mother of a four years old son, I must acknowledge that he already has a very strong interest for various machinery items and other traditionally “manly” issues – even though we as parents are well aware of not passing on traditional expectations! Somehow they just are here.

Dear friends,

It is important to remember that gender stereotypes are created by people and therefore they can also be reconstructed by people. The Committee of Ministers has just adopted a recommendation on preventing and combating sexism. I want to congratulate the Gender Equality Commission for its important work on this issue. I am sure this recommendation will be a useful tool in tackling gender stereotypes alongside other Council of Europe’s recommendations.

I wish you a fruitful and pleasant conference and I hope that you also have a chance to enjoy our beautiful city, Helsinki. Thank you and welcome.