Conference "Are we there yet? Assessing progress, inspiring action –

The Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy 2014-2017"

Tallinn, 30 June – 1 July 2016

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Opening remarks by the Council of Europe's Director General of Democracy

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Prime Minister Rõivas, Ministers, members of the Gender Equality Commission, colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

A warm welcome to you all to this important Conference to assess progress in the implementation of the Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy and - we hope - to give us inspiration on the priority areas for the next one.

I would like to thank the Estonian authorities for hosting this event and for the excellent cooperation we have had in preparing for it. Special thanks to you, Prime Minister, for your commitment to gender equality, which is one of the priority themes of Estonia's current Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe. And, I am grateful for you for having underlined it during your intervention before the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly last week. We welcome your presence here today, alongside the active roles and contribution to the Conference by both the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Social Protection.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am committed to gender equality, not only because it is at the very heart of human rights, but also because more and real gender equality is best for everybody: for women and for men, and for society as a whole.

As demonstrated by the priorities of Estonia's Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers, gender equality is high on the agenda of the Council of Europe. This is an important political signal: at a time of budgetary cuts in gender equality bodies and institutions in some member states, the Council of Europe leads by example by making gender equality a priority area for action.

I think we all agree that much progress has been made in the legislation and policies on gender equality and women's rights in many of our member states, including in tackling gender based violence, access to education and the labour market or participation in public and political life.

It is important to recognise progress and milestone achievements such as the preparation and the entry into force of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) – the most far-reaching international treaty to tackle this serious violation of human rights. Progress and achievements are the result of collective work and efforts: whether we are working with governments or grass root level, regional or international organisations. We should own our successes and achievements and be proud of them.

Equally, we should not shy away from the challenges and failures to overcome them. Many of us share the concerns well expressed recently by the Gender Equality Commission: **we are not there yet and there is still a long way to go to achieve de facto gender equality**. The European Commission's 2014 Report on equality between

women and men, points out that at the present rate of change, it would take another 70 years to achieve gender equality – so, here we are, we have more or less the answer to the question in the title of this conference...So, we need to do more and better, still.

Three years into the implementation of the Strategy, it is clear that the 5 chosen priority areas correspond to the needs and developments in the member states. Take for example the first objective of the Strategy: combating gender stereotyping and sexism, including sexist hate speech. This issue is critical to making progress on all policies, and to get closer to gender equality.

Why would I say that? Because under cover of a culture, a tradition or even a joke, too often women are victims of sexism and sexist hate speech which feeds into and is at the origin of violence against women. We need to speak out against sexism and sexist hate speech and we need to use all the tools available at the Council of Europe.

The recent General Policy Recommendation on combating hate speech, adopted by ECRI last December, for instance, helpfully expands the definition of hate speech to include on the basis of sex, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation. The No Hate Speech Movement campaign to tackle sexism and sexist hate speech is another important development to galvanise action at grassroots' level, especially to mobilise the youth to stand up against hate speech and sexist hate speech. The decision of the Gender Equality Commission to prepare a draft recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to combat sexism is very welcome and I am sure it will give impetus to the work and activities in the member states to tackle sexism and sexist hate speech.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the area of gender equality, the Council of Europe aims to practice internally, within the entire Organisation, what it preaches externally to the member states and other partner organisations. We are mainstreaming a gender perspective across Council of Europe policies and measures, including through the operation of Gender Equality Rapporteurs and the inter-secretariat Gender Mainstreaming Team. I look forward to the exchange of experiences and good practices on gender mainstreaming with national authorities and international organisations over the next two days. And I can already congratulate the Estonian authorities for the initiative to organise training on gender mainstreaming for Estonian representatives to the Council of Europe intergovernmental committees which took place yesterday. It shows the commitment of your authorities to make gender mainstreaming a reality.

The Council of Europe has increasingly become a reference point in the area of gender equality for other regional or international organisations. The side events we regularly organise at the UN Commission on the Status of Women sessions are amongst the best attended because we address topical issues and try to be ahead of the curve. We organize them in close cooperation and coordination with our valuable UN Women partners and colleagues, as well as with member states. I would like to take this occasion to thank both Ms Puri and Ms Saastamoinen for the excellent cooperation we have had in organising this year's event which focused on multiple discriminations and refugee women and responded to a real need to launch the much needed debate on the gender dimension of the refugee crisis, a very serious issue and too often overlooked. As they flee their homes and countries in search for safety and a better life, women face growing threats of violence, systematic sexual abuse and non-respect of their rights. Hidden under a cultural blanket of fear, shame and silence, the endemic violence suffered by migrant and asylum-seeking women and girls mostly goes unreported. The event called for urgent action and specific gender-sensitive measures

to protect the fundamental human rights of women refugees and asylum-seekers as provided by the Council of Europe and other international standards.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Gender inequality continues thriving in the 21st century Europe, and many challenges remain: the persistent inequality between women and men has developed political, justice and socio-economic systems fundamentally fit for men. Patriarchal ideology continues to underlie gender relations, the shaping of institutions, organisations and systems according to the life patterns and experiences of men. In addition, the widespread sexualisation of women's bodies suggesting their permanent sexual availability, gender-biased customs and traditions, all contribute to treating women as subordinate members of the family or society.

Violence against women and the virtual impunity of many aggressors is a direct manifestation of this inequality; it directly affects how women are treated and perceived by public institutions and social structures, including by the justice system – the negative gender stereotypes come into play.

Moving forward - first and foremost, we need to implement the standards that we have. The Council of Europe's work on human rights and gender equality has resulted in a solid legal and policy framework which contributes to fight gender inequality and to better protect women's human rights and dignity in our 47 member States, starting from the effective implementation of the Istanbul Convention whose monitoring started.

Effective monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of standards provides useful information on emerging trends and issues and underpins efforts to improve performance and ensure accountability.

None of us can do this alone. We need strategic partnerships amongst regional and international organisations to ensure synergies and avoid duplication. We are on the right track and I am very pleased to have here with us today UN Women, the European Commission, EIGE, the World Bank and the OSCE.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I look forward to our discussions during this conference, to review the work accomplished to date, to exchange practices and experiences, lessons learnt and wisdom gained, on difficult but timely topics. And I hope, the Conference will provide us with a platform for ideas and proposals for the next gender equality Strategy from 2018 onwards. We, at the Council of Europe, are fully committed to this work. I am sure the Gender Equality Commission will hugely benefit from the Conference for the work ahead for the preparation of the next Gender Equality Strategy of the Council of Europe. I thank you for your presence and look forward to you contribution at this Conference.