Opening Speech on Gender Equality in Sport

EU Conference on Gender Equality in Sport
3 December 2013, Vilnius
Opening Speech on behalf of Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou,
Director Youth and Sport, Chiara Gariazzo

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here with you in Vilnius.

I would like to thank Mr Rimselis for his kind welcoming words, on behalf of the President Ms. Grybauskaite, a clear sign of the importance that the Lithuanian Presidency attaches to our work.

Of course, we should not forget that Vilnius is also home to the European institute of Gender Equality, represented here by its director Ms Virginija Langbakk. You will have the opportunity to hear more about the institute's activities this evening, but I can already say that, with the Institute's presence, it is even more appropriate to hold this conference here.

Over the past months of the Presidency, I have had many occasions to visit this beautiful city for meetings and events on education, youth and sport. Today, I am back to discuss and promote a subject which I feel particularly strongly about: gender equality and the promotion of equal opportunities for women and men in sport.

And it is my wish for this conference to be the start of closer cooperation between the world of gender equality and that of sport. It is a co-operation that will be beneficial to both.

Before I move on to the actual focus of today's conference, I would like to recall how this conference came about. It all started after the successful conference of the European Women and Sport network and EPAS *(Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport)* in London in 2011, where Commissioner Vassiliou had the pleasure to meet many of you who are here today.

She invited three "women and sport" organisations to further discuss possible future actions, since she felt that the progress in equality between women and men in sport had stagnated in certain respects. They were Ms Evelina Georgiades of the European Women and Sport Network, Birgitta Kervinen president of ENGSO *(European non-governmental sports organisation)* and Raija Mattila, co-chair of the International Working Group of Women. Their co-operation, commitment and enthusiasm were instrumental in getting today's conference off the ground and making it a reality.

Thank you so much for this.

Ladies and gentlemen,

These next two days you will have the chance to discuss gender equality in sports from many different angles and to map a possible way forward.

This afternoon, we would like to reflect with you on the main factors which hamper women's participation in the sport world, and to briefly outline the measures we are taking at EU level to help redress the situation.

Our starting point is that gender equality in sport must be a **common goal, genuinely shared by all actors involved**. All public and private partners must be on board. Our stakeholders of course, but also the public authorities.

That is why we wanted representatives of Member States to be present today - Sport directors from our EU Member States held a meeting yesterday in Kaunas; their joining us today shows the commitment of EU governments to promoting gender equality in sport. It is also an important acknowledgement that this is not an issue that's confined to the non-governmental world of sport organisations, but something that concerns public authorities at all levels - national, provincial and local.

In Europe today, more and more girls and women are participating in sport and physical activities. This is an encouraging development. However their participation is still not on an equal level with men and boys. Indeed in some countries

girls and women lag seriously behind men in getting access to sport - you are all experts in this field, so you know very well that many factors, external to sport, can affect their level of participation, such as educational levels, or the role of physical education at school.

However, there are also many factors at play, within the sport sector itself, which can hamper the participation of girls and women. These include, for instance, the lack of gender balance in decision-making boards and commissions, and the lack of sustainable gender equality policies leading to concrete measures in these organisations.

And if we look beyond the board-room, we can examine – as you will be doing - the role of coaches and trainers and the importance of a safe and secure environment for girls and women practising a sport activity.

Indeed, it is my belief that concrete improvements in the participation of girls and women leading to effective equality cannot be reached by decisions in the boardrooms only. A girl in a wheelchair or a young woman seeking to reduce weight to improve fitness will only enjoy sport if there is a positive environment in the clubs; and, in particular, if the coach can create the right challenging but inclusive atmosphere, free of discrimination and threats.

Another crucial factor is the role of the media. Better media coverage for women in sport is an absolute must, as is breaking down the kind of stereotyping which is still prevalent in sport. If a woman goes to a stadium to watch a football game, participates in a sport that's traditionally considered "male" or tries to to train in a male team, she is likely to be confronted with reactions which are unflattering at best, and at worst downright unacceptable.

In this context the media can play a very positive role. By working together, sport organisations and the media can make a difference through better coverage of women in sport. It will not be an easy task, but that is no reason for not giving it a try. I am looking forward to hearing your opinion on this topic at the end of the conference, and your proposal for concrete measures.

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Let me now turn to action at EU level in this field.

2013 has marked a number of real advances in the EU dimension of sport.

To begin with, the Council last week adopted a **recommendation on Health enhancing physical activity (HEPA)**. It is the first recommendation ever for sport, and I am confident that it will help the EU Member States to step up their

efforts to promote physical activity among people, and improve their well-being.

And, of course, there is also the **new Sport Chapter of Erasmus+.** After long and in-depth discussions between the EU institutions involved, the European Parliament last month approved Erasmus +, the new programme for education, training, youth and sport.

For the first time ever, we have a specific budget dedicated to sport. I am particularly proud of this. Erasmus+ will be a key tool for implementing our political priorities. And gender equality in sport is clearly one of them.

Based on our experience with the Preparatory Actions in the field of sport, I am fully confident that good projects on gender equality in sport will emerge which can be supported under Erasmus+. And our new programme will also be an excellent tool to support our wider policy exchange process. We will be offering funding not only for projects, but also studies, conferences, European sport events and European dialogue with sport stakeholders.

We are also finalising the preparation of key implementation instruments such as the "Erasmus+ work programme 2014" and the "programme guide". I can already tell you that seven categories of projects can benefit from our support within the main pillar: "support for collaborative projects". One of them is

about "supporting the implementation in the field of sport of EU strategies in the area of equal opportunities, notably the EU Gender Equality strategy".

So you as you can see, Erasmus + provides a great opportunity to advance toward our common goal of promoting gender equality.

Another major issue that's currently on the table is the **next EU work plan for sport,** in other words the agenda for political cooperation in sport of the EU and its 28 Member States for the years to come**.** So a key policy document, with a lot of concrete implications.

We have consulted sport stakeholders at this year's EU Sport Forum, and the topic of gender equality has repeatedly come up as an important subject for the future. I therefore intend to propose to the Council to integrate gender equality as a subject in the next EU work plan.

But policy work, important as it may be, needs to be complemented by action on the ground. I have therefore decided to set up a **European Week of Sport,** starting in 2015. We are currently busy with the preparations. If all goes well, I plan to present the concept for the year in June 2014 in Brussels. And I would already invite all of you to take part in the events of this future European week.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today and tomorrow you will discuss several proposals for plans or strategies on gender equality in sport at national and European level. The goal is to get concrete measures implemented.

This conference is an important step in the process of bringing the governmental and non-governmental sport sectors together so that they can join forces and bring the fight for gender equality in sport to an even higher level. At the same time, it should also be a solid basis for developing a series of concrete steps involving all stakeholders, including national governments and the European Commission.

I am confident that we will come to sound and convincing outcomes, which will feed into the preparations of new EU policies on equality between women and men as well as into the new EU Work Plan for Sport. Support for these policy steps can be drawn from Erasmus+, enabling the implementation of a number of concrete measures.

I wish you all a fruitful conference and look forward to the continued success of our collaboration.

Thank you.