

**SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF THE CONFERENCE OF PARLIAMENTARY
COMMITTEES FOR EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN AND MEN IN THE
EUROPEAN UNION**

**BY
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Your Royal Highness, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would have liked to welcome you today, on behalf of Mr. Frans Weisglas and myself, to a country, which usually enjoys the reputation of being one of the societies where fundamental rights are respected, something we are proud of. However, the recent dramatic event in Amsterdam has transformed these feelings of pride into feelings of concern. This confronts us with the fact that fundamental rights are not matters we should take for granted but are rights we need to continue to protect and fight for.

Although the topic of today's conference, within this context, might seem less relevant, it, too, touches upon the common ground of fundamental rights and this continuous fight. We need these essential building blocks in order to create a strong society on the national, the European and on the international level.

Looking over the agenda of the Dutch EU-presidency it almost can not be a coincidence that your conference is being held today. This first week of November could really be called "emancipation and equality-week in the EU". On Wednesday and Thursday a conference was held in Amsterdam on ways to stimulate the career development of female employees in companies and organizations. They presented

the results of the European Social Funds-Equal project entitled “Mixed towards a balanced workplace”.

Furthermore, today the second meeting of the High Level Working Group on gender mainstreaming takes place in Brussels. This group is preparing the second EU progress report on gender mainstreaming that will be presented to the Spring Council in 2005 and will also be used for the 10-year implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. So, as you can see, equal opportunities are important for the Dutch presidency and we are of course pleased to be hosting –especially in this week - the meeting of the European Network of Parliamentary committees for equal opportunities for Women and Men.

Topic of this conference will be the economic independence of women, and as a sub theme the economic independence of women belonging to migrant groups and/or minorities. We can of course argue that becoming and being economically independent is a matter of choice, but we can never claim this to be true as long as external circumstances still have such an impact on economic independence. And by these external factors I mean social, cultural and policy aspects that differ within our borders, but also across our borders.

Within the European Union, but also on the international level, we may, however, take pride in multiple conventions, declarations and charters that subscribe to the goals of equality, development and peace for both men and –especially- for women. In 1975 one of the groundbreaking arrests of the European Court of Justice regarding the supranational force of EU-law was about the parity between men and women. This so-called arrest of Defrenne stated the equal treatment of men and women to be

a European civil right. And with the signing of the new constitutional treaty of the European Union, just a few days ago, the Charter of Fundamental Rights is now fully incorporated. So for the last decades, we have made quantum leaps to assure a judicial, legal basis for paving the way towards equal treatment and within that context the way towards more economically independent women.

However, our framework is, to a certain extent just a paper world for achieving our goals. In reality, we still can not lean back and trust the fact that having writing our goals on paper will prove to be enough. We must see this framework as a very useful means to actually achieve our objectives. And in our current society we still have not realized these objectives fully. At the same time, we are being confronted with more and new challenges in the area of equal treatment and we also set ourselves more and higher goals. I would like to take this opportunity to point out some of these challenges, but also draw your attention to issues that are wrongfully outmoded.

One of those subjects that may at first glance appear to be somewhat outdated is the gender pay gap. Unfortunately, reality shows that we still have a gender pay gap in the European Union. The European Commission called it - in the year 2004- a “persistent” gap. Even more worrying is the fact that the Commission talks in her annual report on developments towards gender equality and orientation for gender mainstreaming, about the current trend showing decreasing wages in jobs and sectors of the labour market in which the number of women working in that sector or job is rising. So, it seems that the issue of equal rewarding is definitely not outdated and we therefore need to re-boost our dedication on fixing this gap; which will

discourage women to enter the labour market and progress in their careers. This of course does nothing to contribute to the economic independence of women.

Furthermore, this trend will also not help the EU meet the Lisbon target of 60% female employment in 2010. To reach this goal of 60% we should also look at other options. Maybe more attention should be paid to policies aimed at bringing women back into the workforce, for example, to make formally economically independent women, who took extended periods of leave, economically independent all over again. In many countries it is very difficult for women to rejoin the labour market at an older age. But...aren't these women experienced and knowledgeable workers who might also have the ambition and life experience needed to become successful? This is a challenge that needs more attention on the European and on the national level.

In the last two years the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia published two reports on minorities and migrants. The first was a report on employment and the second report, which was published only very recently, was on education. Both reports came with some disturbing findings. Although they conclude that some progress has been made, our labour markets are still segmented along ethnic and also gender lines. In the EU, third country nationals and people from minority groups have a lower participation rate in the labour market. And these two groups are also faced with high rates of underachievement in the educational field. Another disturbing finding is that women with a migrant background mostly work in specific sectors. Also, female immigrants from Muslim countries are largely excluded from the labour market.

Looking at these findings, it shows that we still have a long way to go. In the nearby future we have to step up our efforts in carrying out the policies that helped us bring women from EU-countries to a higher educational and employment level. Efforts need to specifically target the migrant women and the women of minority groups. This definitely poses a new challenge, especially when targeting efforts need to take into account cultural, religious and national backgrounds. And it is precisely this factor, of whether or not or to what extent the changing of legacies, traditions, cultural and religious backgrounds is desirable in the enhancement and/or the enforcement of equality rights, that makes the subject of equality such a precarious issue.

When forming policies that target migrant women and women of minority groups in particular, we must take into account that there is no such thing as a 'one-policy-fits-all'. It may, therefore, be desirable to consider the apparent diversification that exists across countries and between minority groups. We must, on the one hand, be aware of the great diversity that exists between the women of minority groups themselves, especially in regard to matters such as education, culture and participation in the workforce. Whilst women of some minority groups are, for example, already actively participating in the workforce, others might require extra attention in this particular area. On the other hand, we must also be aware of the fact that EU countries do not all face the same challenges when it comes to minority groups and women. Some countries have to deal with issues such as language barriers, whereas others are faced with challenges regarding the so-called 'headscarf issue'.

Within this framework, I would like attempt to just briefly and without taking a stand, touch upon the subject of headscarves. In several countries this last year, the

discussion arose on whether Muslim women could be denied access to state (secular) schools when wearing their headscarves. I believe this is one of those precarious situations I was talking about earlier and in which relations are strained because of the delicate and sometimes blurry dividing line apparent between the pursuance of goals aimed at equal treatment and the pursuance of goals aimed at respecting religion, tradition and culture. The report of the Centre on Racism and Xenophobia stated that aspects of religion or culture that are of the utmost importance for some women can in some cases influence and sometimes even limit these same women in their opportunities for work and education. The same report also states that across all ethnic groups, females with a migrant or minority background do better at primary and secondary education than males. In order to hold on to these positive results, we must ask ourselves which goals we aspire to. Can or better yet should we look at equal treatment as eventually being the right to enjoy all of our civil rights in the same way, in this case the right to education or the right to work. Do stateswomen and statesmen have the obligation morally or legally to consider each case carefully and be aware of the, in some cases, mutual exclusive nature of religious/cultural issues in complex equal rights questions? One can arguably state that these are questions that may point towards a clash between fundamental rights.

These issues that I touched upon in the last five minutes are just some of the many problems that I believe to be very important, but at the same time are also very difficult to tackle. However, I firmly believe that we have to keep paying attention to these issues and we have to keep talking about the different options for reaching our common goals. That's why I believe it so important to have conferences like the one

today. Hopefully today will bring us one step closer to that moment when we can truly claim that economic independence of women is nothing more than a personal choice!

I wish you all a very fruitful conference.

Thank you!