Honourable Members of the Women's Rights Committee
Ladies and gentlemen,

Might I begin by congratulating the Women's Rights Committee for organising this hearing on gender mainstreaming. Your timing could not be more appropriate. On May 1st, the Treaty of Amsterdam enters into force - placing equality of opportunity between women and men explicitly among the objectives of the Community and formalising the principle of gender mainstreaming.

A few days ago I attended a conference in Paris addressing the issue of gender balance in decision-making.

The gender gap in decision-making is a serious flaw of our democracies. The effective participation of women in decision-making is not only important in itself, as a moral issue. It is also important as a driving force for ensuring that the equality dimension is integrated into all major policy discussions. Gender mainstreaming is made much, much more effective if it is accompanied by better representation of women in the decision-making process. However, it is important to stress that what is at stake is not simply the quantitative objective of a numerical balance or a particular percentage - rather it is the qualitative objective of actually improving decision-making.

The Nordic countries provide very clear examples of this process. A high level of women in decision-making contributes significantly to the policy agenda and so to the success of gender mainstreaming.

That is why I attach high importance to the elections for the European Parliament.

Here we have a unique opportunity to achieve a balanced participation of women and men in the most important elected body of the European Union.

My services have been working closely with the co-ordination group of the Women's Rights Committee to prepare campaign material in favour of women and an improved gender balance in the new Parliament.

I have been very impressed by the quality and variety of the material that has been prepared, and I have high hopes for a balanced result.

Another crucial issue that was raised in the Progress Report is Enlargement.