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Informal meeting of Ministers responsible for Equality between women and men  
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Commissioner Pádraig Flynn

Minister Bergmann,

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Appreciable

First of all, I would like to thank Minister Bergmann for her very welcome initiative in organising this informal meeting and for affording us all the opportunity of hearing the very interesting analysis of the new Treaty. It gives me particular pleasure to be here today because this will probably be one of my last interventions as European Commissioner in charge of Equality. And that fact allows me to indulge today in some "achievements listing" and in setting down some of the challenges for the future.

Equal opportunities for women and men is now an area of political priority in the European Union and this fact is emphasized by a number of very important developments which have taken place in the last five years.

If there is a single word which marks European equality policy in recent years it would be, without doubt: "mainstreaming". It is now firmly accepted that gender equality has to be promoted not only by the specifically appointed equal opportunities bodies and actors but also by all decision-making bodies and actors; gender equality is a task for all.

This does not, of course, mean abandoning the use of specific or positive action in favour of equality where and when such action is needed. Such specific measures have played a valuable role in correcting the outright discrimination of the past and can and must continue to do so. But in my view, specific measures are all the more effective when backed by an approach, which sees all policies inspired by the notion of mainstreaming.

The European employment strategy provides a superb example of how that is being done in practical policy formulation. As we all know around this table, the problem of unemployment in Europe is mainly the problem of women's unemployment. It is recognised that Europe's future as a successful economy and labour market depends on women – on their skills, their talents and creativity, their potential. But there are 25 million fewer women than men employed in the EU. Women still run a higher risk of becoming unemployed. And when they have lost their jobs, they run a significantly higher risk than men of becoming long-term unemployed. 4.5% of the male labour force is long-term unemployed; 6.2% of the female labour force is long-term unemployed.

At this moment, the Commission services are analysing the National Actions Plans for employment. This will be the first test for gender mainstreaming in all employment measures. The Joint Employment Report, including the evaluation of these plans, will be one of the last documents that the present Commission will adopt the first days of September.

I can promise you that I shall be looking very closely at the integration of equality into these plans.

Forty years after the signing of the Treaty of Rome, women continue to earn less than men, they are more at risk of poverty, they are barred by a "glass ceiling" from access to senior influential decision-making posts. Women lack equal access to qualified jobs and career paths. And they take on a much greater share of responsibilities for family and household tasks than do men. I am of the opinion that the new Treaty offers potential instruments to meet these challenges.

As I said earlier, the new Treaty essentially institutionalises the dual approach - mainstreaming and specific action. First of all, let's take mainstreaming. In Article 2 of the Treaty, equality between women and men is placed among the explicit objectives of the Community and Article 3 paragraph 2 obliges the Community, in all its tasks, to aim to eliminate inequalities and promote equality between women and men. However, mainstreaming is not an easy notion, it is complex and it is long term. It requires the development of new approaches, new ways of looking at policy formulation, and new tools.

That last observation brings me to another subject of crucial importance, which cuts across all policy areas and which has its link to mainstreaming, - gender balance in decision making. The balanced participation of women in decision-making greatly improves the chances that the concerns, needs and interests of women and men are equally considered. This is what mainstreaming is all about. The different but complementary views of men and women should be reflected in all decisions and policies affecting everyday life. Studies show that a critical mass of 30% of women is necessary before impact is felt. This fact is beginning more and more to be realised and acted upon. Just two weeks ago in Cologne, Mr Prodi confirmed his commitment that the new Commission would be, at least, as good as the present and, if possible, even better, as far as gender balance was concerned. That means that at least five of the twenty Commissioners will be women.