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NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Council (EPSCO)
Subject: Equality between women and men: strategic orientations up to 2020

Delegations will find attached the Presidency background note on the above subject, with a view to the lunch discussion at the EPSCO Council on 18 June.

Lunch discussion

Equality between women and men: strategic orientations up to 2020

Presidency background note

Gender equality is a cross-cutting and horizontal policy area, which concerns the whole population in all walks of life and is best pursued through a two-pronged approach involving *specific actions* and *gender mainstreaming*. From a strategic perspective, this means taking an integrated approach, and ensuring that the cause of gender equality is vigorously promoted through overarching governance frameworks such as the Europe 2020 Strategy. Conversely, it is also well known that gender equality is a prerequisite for achieving the headline targets set in the Europe 2020 Strategy, in particular in the fields of employment and fighting poverty and social exclusion.

In 2010, the European Commission adopted a Strategy for equality between women and men for 2010-2015, which set out five priority areas: equal economic independence; equal pay for equal work or work of equal value; equality in decision-making; dignity, integrity and an end to gender-based violence; and gender equality in external actions. The Strategy also covers horizontal issues relating to gender roles, legislation, governance and tools for gender equality, and it lists key actions to be taken by the European Commission in all six areas. The Commission has tracked the progress made in its annual Reports on progress on equality between women and men.

The EPSCO Council endorsed the Strategy in a set of Conclusions adopted on 6 December 2010 and adopted a European Pact for Gender Equality (2011-2020) on 8 March 2011, reaffirming the commitment to fulfil EU ambitions on gender equality, in particular to close the gender gaps in employment and social protection; to promote better work-life balance for women and men throughout the life-course; and to combat all forms of violence against women.

While the commitments under the Pact remain in place until 2020, the current Strategy expires at the end of this year. The Commission is currently reflecting on the way forward over the next five years and has started a wide consultation process with key stakeholders and the broader public. Key issues are under discussion, including the question as to whether a new Strategy will indeed be adopted for the period 2016-2020; the format that such a Strategy might take; and its content.

Following the Forum on the Future of Gender Equality that took place in Brussels on 20-21 April, the Latvian Presidency wrote to Ministers responsible for gender equality, inviting them to co-sign a letter addressed to Commissioner Jourová that made the case for continuing to treat gender equality policy as a separate strategic domain. Ministers from 21 Member States decided to join this initiative, and the letter was duly sent to the Commission on 4 June 2015, highlighting the need for an EU Strategy for equality between women and men, urging the importance of preserving its status as a stand-alone document, and calling for reinforced governance on gender equality in the EU.

Within the broad strategic context, it is widely recognised that facilitating the reconciliation of work, family and private life is a key driver of progress and a means to promote women's participation in the labour market. There is indeed a strong economic case for a renewed policy impetus to support female participation in the labour market and to improve work-life balance for women and men, thereby contributing to jobs and growth. This perspective has been repeatedly endorsed at the EU level. Women's contribution is also needed in the other areas where strategic headline targets have been set -- namely R&D, climate change and energy sustainability and education. Most important of all: society as a whole -- both women and men -- will benefit when there is *de facto* gender equality.

For these reasons, the Presidency strongly believes that gender equality should continue to enjoy prominent status within the EU over the next five years and beyond and that the European Commission has a key role to play by developing a clear, ambitious and continuous strategic vision. The Commission's annual reports on equality between women and men should also continue to enjoy full and official status as separate document.

Against this background, the Presidency wishes to give Ministers at the EPSCO Council the opportunity to express their views on the relevant issues and to hear the current views of the European Commission. Ministers are invited to consider the following questions:

- 1) **What would be three main priorities that a strategic policy document for equality between women and men after 2015 should address?**

- 2) **How can gender equality policy better and more fully contribute to the achievement of the Europe 2020 headline targets? What specific instruments would you consider necessary in this field?**