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CONGO

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Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

A few weeks ago I chaired a panel on gender-based discrimination at a Seminar on EU-UN Cooperation in the Struggle against all Forms of Discrimination at the occasion of the opening of a new Regional Office of the HCHR in Brussels., where we discussed how to better implement women's human rights and how to find ways to address the injustice - I quote the High Commissioner for Human Rights - “that hampers, belittles and suppresses women's contribution to society”.

Despite the fact that the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* sets out legally binding internationally accepted standards on the rights of women which are applicable to all women in all societies and fields of life and despite some progress, women virtually everywhere and in all spheres of activity remain subject to inequalities in law and in everyday life.

Women are still socially and economically underprivileged; there is still a considerable pay differential between men and women; the labour market remains divided into a women's labour market, which is often characterized by stagnation and marginalized by international competition – and a dynamic, well-paid men's labour market.

Women, who are by now more strongly represented in the middle management positions, still hit the ‘glass ceiling’, which they can look through but not break through. Responsible managerial positions remain largely out of their reach.

The backlash sets in whenever redistribution measures within societies worldwide are at stake. In such situations, all kinds of reform are under discussion, with the exception of those that would really empower women to have a say in these

transformations and would not degrade them to mere petitioners for the favors of the much-vaunted new era.

Throughout Europe and beyond, women's policies are again challenged by much-cited crises of the welfare state, by budget consolidation measures, by cuts in social services, by rising unemployment and sluggish economic growth. In all the attempts at reforms, the focus is certainly not on the interests of women. On the contrary, their interests are at stake.

So, it is evident that the enlightenment of modern societies about countless dimensions of inequality between women and men has made little progress.

We do not need any major sociological studies to draw the conclusion that we are still separated from a 'parity democracy' – that is democracy based on equal representation – or from a 'gender democracy' - as I would like to call it - by the reality of inequality between women and men existing in our societies. We are separated from it by the ingrained conviction that gender relationship is a private relationship rather than an organizational expression of society or a power relationship.

I would claim that the changes benefiting women, for example in law and education, are, first of all, changes in awareness. In the field of labour and social security as well as in terms of participation in the public and political life, the situation of women is changing, although haltingly.

But, the support structures of a prevailing gender relationship, namely: asymmetry, hierarchy, polarization and power, have not been thoroughly shaken by emancipation and women-oriented policies. The 'patriarchal male' has an immense staying power, both individually and collectively.

The awareness of women, on the other hand, has moved ahead of the prevailing conditions, and it is very unlikely that the clocks of this awareness will be set back again.

But, the awareness of men is totally different. In the majority of cases their open-mindedness remains purely verbal and their practical actions fail to match their intellectual arguments.

This starting position clearly indicates that we are in for a long conflict. The road to

‘gender democracy’, to an egalitarian gender relationship, is littered with obstacles such as conflicting interests or contrasting circumstances.

If the two sexes begin to reflect seriously on the structure of their relationship, they must inevitably conclude that the overall situation of our society stands in an urgent need for change. It may sound optimistic, but I truly believe that in the medium and long term there is no alternative to reorganization of our societies, and consequently, of the gender relationship.

This is where politics have to come in. And we have to ask: What are the framework conditions provided by government policies for the two sexes? Do they favor an egalitarian gender relationship that prevents disadvantages from arising regardless of being woman or man? Or, do they obscure the real power relationships and therefore perpetuate them?

You may recall the principle of the women’s movement that ‘private matters are political matters’. This means no more and no less than that the gender relationship is a politically relevant one, as is the relationship between women and the state, general public and the powers that be. The role of women in society is still characterized by exclusion rather than involvement. A woman’s path through life, and especially its family dimension, is considered to be beyond the reach of policy-makers.

The political response to this ultimately undemocratic situation must consist in a clear and serious commitment to changes in the societal structure in the inter-set of gender equality.

How must these changes look like?

To men, the term equality has a different meaning. It does not mean, as women see it: better career opportunities, economic independence, less housework. For men it means more competition, reducing one’s career and more housework. And in the individual case, from their perspective, equality of husband and wife is considered perfectly compatible with the prevailing traditional division of labour.

What must be changed, therefore, is the current assignment of both remunerated and non-remunerated work. In this context, the separation of ‘public’ and ‘private’ may have especially fatal consequences for women. There has never been any society, in which unremunerated work did not predominate over remunerated one. Worldwide,

most of the non-remunerated work is performed by women – in the Western European countries the percentages are two thirds to four fifths. These facts are strictly excluded from economic theories, because the term ‘economic’ signifies only that which can be expressed in money’s worth.

In times of economic crises, women are doubly effected, both as the actors in the labour market and as those that have to keep their families going on less income. The impact of these circumstances on women is manifold. In our profit-seeking societies women are deprived of their fundamental human right to a secure and independent economic existence. Their work is poorly remunerated or not remunerated at all. They remain dependent and are put at risk of dropping below the poverty line.

To my mind, this is where long-term processes of change have to set in. What is at issue here is the subsistence, the individually secured existence of women, the commencement of freedom as a fundamental democratic right.

Still, I should like to address another field which structures have to be thoroughly changed, should our societies wish to claim that they are at least on the way to gender democracy. What I am referring to are our legal systems. In spite of *de jure* equality of women and men in our legislations, despite of equality proclamations, despite of the considerable progress as regards the legal status of women in Europe and beyond, the fundamental idea behind human rights has not been translated into practice. Freedom from poverty and violence, equal working and living conditions, self-determination and responsible participation in all society-affecting decisions are the benefits that women throughout the world are still waiting for.

The formal gender-neutral laws still declare ‘male’ as the standard. The unequal circumstances of the two sexes are largely ignored. Hence, in this way equal rights generate injustice. On the one hand, we have in most Western European countries largely egalitarian legal systems, but on the other hand, women are engaged in an ongoing struggle for their *de facto* equality in a non-egalitarian legal reality. A

democracy which fails to provide the same safeguards for the rights of women and men and, therefore, perpetuates gender hierarchy is light-years removed from gender democracy.

This deficiency becomes strikingly obvious when we look at violence against

women. Women's rights are frequently not recognized as human rights. Violations of women's rights are very often the rule and not the exception. And violence against women is very often 'taken for granted'. Many encroachments on women's rights committed in the private sphere, for instance, are not even considered human rights violations. Many women around the world have to suffer both domestic and sexual as well as structural violence. From countless armed conflicts and wars throughout the world we know that raping women has become part of war strategy and that the bodies of women are instrumentalized by men in the conduct of their hostilities. It is the dignity and the right of women to physical and mental integrity that are exposed to specific, sexist forms of violation through torture, sexual abuse, rape and not least human trafficking.

The issue of male violence against women, the worst form of gender discrimination, will inevitably come up in any critical argument about the gender relationship. Even if we accept that not all men are perpetrators and not all women are directly exposed to violence, the fact of massive violence against women does have the impact on all men and on all women, and becomes a yardstick for human dignity in our societies.

I said at the outset that the gender relationship is not merely a private matter, but a matter that bears the imprint of the conditions prevailing in our societies. The correlations between patriarchal structures and male violence against women have been conclusively established. The unequal distribution of power between the two sexes in all fields of society, the social and economic dependence of many women, the persistently upheld stereotypes of masculinity and strength and, not least, the tolerance of our legal systems and of the public at large towards the so-called 'private violence' – just to mention the core factors – aid and abet men in acts of sexual and other forms of violence against women.

These thoughts, which hold little promise for the achievement of gender democracy, hold at least a theoretical chance: since men are, as it were, *the* society, since we all live in 'democracies of men', men also have an alternative. They may be part of collective patterns of action and cling to all the privileges of the male society, but they may also decide against such involvement and against wielding their power over women. Whenever we – the women – address these issues, we ought to be on the

look-out for men that have renounced this involvement. So far, we have unfortunately happened to witness only the odd exception, trying to get rid of stereotypes and pressures to conform, to shed old models and to try out new life styles. Life in our societies has remained largely untouched by the emergence of such men. We are, on the contrary, faced with a renaissance of male value judgements and role stereotypes. Economic recession and tight labour markets favor and sanction the attempts to halt or at least to break the process of achieving equality for and ending discrimination against women.

Backlash is not a mere buzzword, but harsh reality. It is brought home to women in different ways and to varying degrees in order to emphasize that the achievements of women's policies are not being safeguarded, and that the chances for a development towards gender democracy are very dim. Women's policy-makers are swimming against a rising tide. The scope of action available for women that do not wish to make concessions is narrowing.

For some time now, feminist academics have been analyzing the growing opposition against swift progress towards equality. Their findings and hypotheses reveal fear of competition as well as fear of losing certain privileges. On the one hand, male power structures, long-standing traditions and vested interests are to be safeguarded, and on the other, personal positions are to be defended. Careers, old-boys-networks and male lobbyism are not to be undermined by female empowerment.

Of course, it is to be welcomed that occasionally men go in for self-criticism and address at the political and academic level the causes of the backlash as well as the dangers their sex might be exposed to, in case of losing their power positions. I am convinced that in the long run also men holding politically responsible positions will have to realize that a patriarchal society is incompatible with true democracy. The prevailing, traditionally established forms of policy-making, which exclude women from all truly relevant decisions and thus, from all equal say in social life, are naturally unsuited to achieve gender democracy. The substance, the positions and the aims of women's policies all converge on fundamental changes in mind sets and action patterns. Women's policies are designed pro-actively to eliminate gender as a factor which determines people's chances in life. This is the true meaning of the

principle of equality as it is anchored in most Western European and other constitutions.