### Le meilleur de l'Europe pour les femmes

### SPEECH BY VICE-PRESIDENT MARGOT WALLSTRÖM Paris, 27 November 2008

Mme la Présidente,

Ministers,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Good morning! It's a great pleasure for me to be here in this beautiful city of Paris, and especially a pleasure to join you in discussing the fundamentally important issue of **gender equality** and of "Choisir"s innovative project and idea for a **Most Favoured European Woman Clause**.

I would like to spend the next few minutes briefly addressing **three questions**:

- 1. What does it mean to be a woman in Europe today?
- 2. What is Europe doing for women?
- 3. What can women do for Europe and for themselves?

#### I. Being a woman in Europe today

Let me give you a few illustrations of what it means to be a European woman today.

Let's start with 22 year old **Ineta**, a student of mathematics at the University of Riga. She is fortunate. When she wakes up in the morning, her biggest dilemma these days, is whether she should accept a job offer from a Latvian IT company - which is what her boyfriend wants - or if she ought to go ahead with her dream of finishing her master's degree in Paris.

Ineta has her whole life in front of her and all the freedom of choice that many of the young in Europe enjoy today. She never gives a thought to the fact that her life will be limited for the simple reason that she was born a woman.

For example, she cannot expect to make as much money as her student boyfriend. Women in Europe today are paid in average close to 16 per cent less than men for exactly the same job even if they work on average longer hours than men on average. Ineta happens to be lucky in this respect. Had she been born in neighbouring Estonia, the wage difference would have been over 25 per cent...

At the speed at which the wage gap between men and women is closing, it will take another 70 years before every one is paid the same money for the same job...which is by the way, a right enshrined in the EU Treaty of 1957....

And if Ineta has any ambitions to get on with her career, she will have her work cut out for her. In Europe a measly 3 per cent of all company executives are women. Nine out of ten of company board members are men.

Let's take another example. Around the time when Ineta wakes up in the morning, 36 year old **Louise** usually returns back to her home, in the suburbs of Frankfurt, after having seen her children to school. Louise chose to give up her job at a PR consultancy when she started a family. She felt someone had to be there for the children — most German schools finishes around noon - and Louise does not have her parents nearby to lend a hand.

Louise does not think of herself as an entrepreneur but she is actually doing quite well, working from home. The demand is so big that she could easily hire people to work with her. But she cannot see herself fitting in that sort of expanding work life with her family life.

There are million's of women in Louise's situation all over Europe. You'd think that society would welcome and reward childbearing, especially on a continent where the population growing older fast, since we are not having enough babies to make up for it. You would think that maybe society would steer some of the bonuses and freebies so generously distributed among men on the financial markets, to the very people taking on the large task that it is to give society more children.

But no, our societies do not reward childbearing or parenting. It took binding EU rules to give all young women in Europe the right to take time off from work when giving birth.

Even well off countries such as Germany and United Kingdom had not come up with that idea of their own. The truth is that on the labour market, childbearing – even just the fact that you are at an age where you are able to bear children – is a disadvantage for every one that wants to get on with a career. Child care facilities are considered a luxury, not a necessity.

Let's now turn to 28 year old **Rosa**. Rosa brings all her four children to work with her. Her workplace is the street and her home is a tent. Rosa came with her husband and children from Romania to the big city of Rome and now makes a living out of selling plastic toys or cheap gadgets of any kind that her supplier can come up with.

Rosa has done what Ineta is thinking of, she has exercised her right to free movement in order to make a better life for herself and her family. Her life obviously differs enormously from Ineta's and Louise's but they have more in common than you might think.

For starters, it is Rosa, not her husband Ivan, that takes care of the children. It is the women in Europe that shoulder the responsibility and the extra work that comes with having a family. Women do roughly four hours daily of household tasks and on top of it, it is women that will be looking after their parents when they get old or sick.

Should Rosa, Ineta and Louise need medical care, they will have to make do with the fact that it will most likely be tailored to the needs of men because in medicine, the man's body is still the norm. Clinical tests are mainly performed on men. This means that treatment and medicines will most likely be adapted to a man, even when the patient is a woman.

It goes without saying that Rosa, Ineta and Louise will have a lower pension once they retire (well, Rosa doesn't really count on a pension at all, she is hoping her kids will look after her)....

Also statistically one of the three women that I have chosen to talk to you about today will suffer physical or sexual violence in a relationship – and many continue to suffer violence from former partners even after the break-up.

So what is it to be a woman in the EU today? Well, to paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir, I would say that: "This is still a man's world" – and Europe is no exception. Gender discrimination is still practised in many European Union countries, even where legislation bans it, and the principal victims are immigrant women and those belonging to ethnic minorities.

## II. So, what are European policy-makers and legislators doing about these issues? What is Europe doing for women?

#### The fact is, Europe has already done a lot.

Gender discrimination of all kinds is banned both in the EU Treaty and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Moreover, the EU Treaty enshrines the principle of equal pay for equal work, and there are three EU Directives on this issue!

To encourage and help more women to set up businesses, the Commission supports the EU network of female entrepreneurs.

The Commission has proposed legislation to reinforce the right to maternity leave and we have recommended action to provide more and better childcare facilities. We have also begun talks with employers and trade unions on parental leave.

In 2007 we set up the European Institute for Gender Equality, based in Vilnius, which will help EU policy-makers by gathering, analysing and disseminating research data and by raising public awareness of the issue.

To tackle the problem of violence, particularly against women and children, the EU has set up a programme known as Daphne III. It finances the work of NGOs and local authorities in protecting the victims of violence. Since it was set up in 1997, the programme

has funded over 500 projects, half of which are for the benefit of women. In 2007, 14 million euros were spent on these projects.

To sum up: the EU has good legislation and some excellent programmes; but its policies and recommendations need solid implementation in each and every EU country.

#### Is there more that the European Union can do?

The Commission is strongly committed to finding a solution to such persistent problems which need to be put higher up in the political agenda of national governments. This is why I welcome the work of *Choisir la Cause des Femmes* and the broad overview it affords of measures that best support or protect women.

What about this interesting proposal for a "most favoured European women's clause" in the EU Treaty?

I think it is an excellent idea to compare 'best practices' from all the EU member states in terms of women's rights. It would show us which countries are setting the highest standards, and serve as a "benchmark" of excellence towards which other countries could aspire.

Of course, the EU has to respect the principle of "subsidiarity". In plain language, it is up to individual national authorities to take decisions in the spheres for which they have sole responsibility – and that includes most social legislation.

However, and without prejudging the discussions that you will have today on the legal feasibility of the clause, let me say a few words of encouragement. If the issues that you will be discussing today were to become, as I think they should be, priority issues for national governments and if they agreed on the need for an EU benchmarking system to promote the 'upwards harmonisation' of national legislation in the field, I am sure the Commission would be ready to help.

Conferences like this one, and national campaigns by women's organizations, raise awareness among EU and national policymakers, and this will help put the "Clause" idea on the political agenda. I will certainly do what I can to promote it.

# III. Let me come now to my third and final question: what can women do for Europe – and for themselves?

Ineta, Louise, Rosa and any other woman must face the truth that during their life time, they will be hampered by the fact that they were born women. How can this go on, year after year? After all, we are talking about 52 per cent of the population....

Well, it may have something to do with the fact that women are underrepresented in any assembly where decisions are made.

Since World War II, the 27 EU member countries have changed governments a number of times (Italy as it happens, 62 times). Still, we have only seen a woman head the government 9 times during that period.

In the governments of EU 27 today, you'll find 24 per cent women (and roughly half of them have been assigned cultural or social issues).

Not even 1 in 4 members of national parliaments are women (23 per cent).

The European Union is no shining example. Out of 12 presidents of the European Parliament, only 2 have been women. Among the 12 Presidents of the European Commission, there has not been one woman.

The current Commission has actually set a new record in female representation. Still, we are only 10 out of 27.

I am not talking about perfect justice here - one woman for every man. I am simply talking about parity.

This is not a romantic notion of mine, about women being better people and therefore better decisions makers. It is about bringing a female perspective in to the table where men currently are occupying all the places, in order for decisions to better reflect the needs of all people. If women are not at the policy-making table, the agenda will be set by men – and we cannot depend on them to give priority to issues that women consider important.

One of the most important things we can do right now as European women is to campaign for gender equality in European politics.

Time has come for change. There may have been a rational reason for the burden sharing among the sexes historically. Today it is an obstacle for us all.

It's no good for Ineta, for Rosa or Louise.

It's no good for the vibrating, including democracy we want to live in.

It's no good for economy.

What can we do about it.? One opportunity presents itself quite soon. In June next year, elections for the European Parliament will be held. A step in the right direction would be to use this occasion to redress the balance.

Also, during 2009 several EU top positions are going to be filled, for example the Presidency of the European Commission, the presidency of the European Parliament and a High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy will be nominated.

In a recently launched campaign for parity, 50/50, The European Women's Lobby has presented several demands that we can all support. I want to see "50-50" democracy in the EU, and I am actively campaigning for it. <u>Please support the campaign!</u> Take one of the campaign leaflets and sign up for it today!

#### **Conclusion**

Ladies, fellow women citizens of Europe: let me close, with some words from Simone de Beauvoir: "Change your life today. Don't gamble on the future: act now, without delay".

Thank you!