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**Slovenian Presidency Conference
"Elimination of Gender Stereotypes: Mission (Im)Possible?«
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Paper presented by the European Women's Lobby**

Introduction: the European Women's Lobby

The European Women's Lobby is a non governmental organisation that brings together over 4000 women's organisations working to promote equality of women and men and to ensure that gender equality and women's human rights are taken into consideration in all European Union policies. The EWL membership is composed on the one hand of National Co ordinations of women's organisations (28 co ordinations in current EU MS and accession countries) and 18 large European and international networks.

In our work we focus on 1) women and economic justice including labour market issues, employment legislation and social policies 2) women in political decision-making and institutional issues 3) violence against women and women's human rights 4) issues linked to immigration and asylum.

Combating gender stereotypes: the need to start at the earliest stage

Gender inequalities and stereotyping start with the birth of each child and even before that. The fact that millions women and girls are "missing" in the world is a good proof of that. This situation is due to selective abortions, and femicides, higher mortality rate for baby girls, all forms of violence against women and inequalities between women and men throughout the life cycle. A hundred million women died or were never born simply because they were female.

This extreme example is of direct concern for us in Europe for different reasons. The first reason is that we have a responsibility in the way that we treat women from countries where these forms of violence exist. The second is that even in the European Union, gender equality is not a reality and inequalities start as early as pregnancy in the form of gender stereotypes or symbolic preferences towards boys. The idea that the birth of a boy is more valuable than the birth of a girl or that it is more important for boys to do well at school or to study relates to the differential value placed on sexes and the fact that our social organisation more value is given to male than to female roles. Even today, European societies are organised around patriarchal patterns where male domination and female subordination are still very present, including in symbolic representation, in the arts, the media etc. Therefore, gender stereotypes play an important role in shaping gender relationships.

Generally speaking, **the integration of a gender perspective is therefore necessary in all European and national policies related to children, including in relation to measures and activities undertaken in relation to the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child.** It has to be

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noted in particular that girls as compared to older women have additional difficulties in opposing gender inequalities and gender-based violence and that the language used plays an important role: the word “children” is mostly used in policy document, but it is gender-blind and hides differences faced by girls and boys.

Gender stereotypes and roles in childhood

Gender roles are shaped and imposed through a variety of social influences. Formed during the socialization phases of childhood and adolescence, gender roles influence people throughout their lives. The first and one of the strongest influences on a person's perceived gender role is his or her parents. Parents are the first teachers and some parents still hold traditional definitions of maleness and femaleness and what kind of activities are appropriate for each.

Parents start early in treating their baby boys and baby girls differently. Although baby boys are more likely to die in infancy than girls, and are actually more fragile as infants than girls are, studies have shown that parents tend to respond more quickly to an infant daughter's cries than they are to those of an infant son. Parents are also more likely to allow boys to try new things and activities--such as learning to walk and explore--than they are girls; parents tend to fear more for the safety of girls. Children also look to their parents for examples and role models, boys and girls will be strongly influenced by the gender relations, the behaviour, tasks and activities undertaken by women and men in the family. If a girl sees her mother taking part in physical activities, for example, she will grow up with the idea that it's okay for girls to play sports. If a boy sees his father helping to take care of the new baby, he will integrate this image of "daddy as care giver" into his developing definition of masculinity.

Another influence and reinforcement of gender roles comes from the toys children play with, which set children up early on for the roles they are expected to play. As they get older, children are influenced in their choice of toys by television and advertisement, which often reinforce the traditional gender roles: boys are usually given more active and “technical” toys, while very often, girls are expected to play with dolls or even items copying domestic work instruments (cooking tools etc). Clothing manufacturers produce (and parents buy) clothing in gender-neutral shades such as yellow and green, but the traditional blue for boys and pink for girls are still favourites. Peer pressure is also a means of reinforcing a culture's traditional gender roles. It can come in the form of taunting or teasing a child who does not fit the traditional gender roles that other children in the peer group have been exposed to, even to the point of excluding that child from group activities.

Education and schools playing a crucial role in shaping gender stereotypes

Gender roles are also reinforced by school. Teachers, school administrators and education material have great influence as they pass along cultural information and expectations. More or less visible mechanisms of inequality and segregation exist in educational systems in Europe despite increased co-education systems. It is not sufficient to put children with a different life experience and hierarchical social roles together at school groups to eliminate discrimination. Schools in fact prepare girls and boys to adhere and keep in line with the traditional gender roles (e.g. in Belgium there is 10% girls in computer curricula and 15% boys in nurse training). Sexist stereotypes are conveyed both by teachers (willingly or not) and the education support material.

Access to formal primary, secondary and third level education and the content of the curriculum as taught to girls and boys is a major influencing factor on gender differences and correspondingly on choices and access to rights. In the EU, while both girls and boys access to education in general may appear to be less problematic in comparison to other parts of the world,

it should nevertheless be pointed out that girls and boys are not equal in accessing and fully availing of education systems and opportunities. In particular, access to girls from minorities, such as girls from the Roma community, migrant girls, asylum seekers, refugees and girls with disabilities remains highly problematic in some countries.

This has strong implications on the labour market: there are many jobs where one sex occupies more than 80% of employment but jobs that are male-dominated (more than 95% men) are much more numerous and usually more valued than female-dominated jobs, which means that women have less choice when they choose a career and are left with less valued professions, both in terms of income and in terms of power and symbolic social value.

The development of girl friendly school environments, education on gender awareness and encouraging girls to become leaders are essential to ensuring that the girl-child is central to formal education systems and this from the earliest levels of education. Awareness raising and education of the girl child in relation to human rights instruments and capacity building to ensure full use of these are equally crucial.

Although the educational system is not solely responsible for this inequality, the situation could be improved through the following measures:

- Pursue active policies to ensure that **girls from minority groups and girls from migrant communities have access to education** and educational systems.
- Make it obligatory by law to include a **gender perspective in teachers' training**.
- Ensure training for professionals dealing with career orientation are aware and given tools to **challenge the gender segregation** in the choice and options of girls and boys.
- **Assess syllabus and the content of school textbooks** with the view to a reform, which would lead to the integration of gender issues as part of all education material as a cross cutting theme, both in terms of eliminating gender stereotypes and in terms of making women's contribution & role in history, literature, arts etc more visible, including the earliest school levels.
- **Promote a European dimension in education through for example:** ensuring the sharing of good practices on gender equality as an education tool and by developing and gathering gender sensitive statistics on all aspects of education at national and EU level.
- Include **quantitative and qualitative gender equality indicators** in all **evaluation programmes** aiming at evaluating the quality of education in European schools.

The role of media and social environment

Often, the way in which the image of girls is constructed in **public space** lowers her social value and promotes violence towards girls. While media can play a positive educative role, stereotypes on the girl child are widespread in media and often tend to reinforce traditional attitudes and behaviour, including in advertisement and children's programmes. Strict and precise legislative norms are needed to regulate the use of girl-child images in public space, the media, advertising and commercials including the consequences of breaking the norms.

In relation to **pornography**, the changes that have taken place in pornography's cultural status needs to be addressed. The changes also referred to as the 'mainstreaming of pornography' can be described as the current cultural process in which pornography slips into our everyday lives as an evermore universally accepted, often idealised, cultural element. This development is of great concern because power and gender are central elements in pornography, which are in total contradiction with the values of gender equality.

Mainstreaming of pornography manifests itself particularly clearly within youth culture: from teenage television and lifestyle magazines to music videos and commercials targeted at the young. Young women and men are mostly affected by pornography's new cultural status. But the major problem is that this exposure is not always voluntary. Little research has been conducted concerning the way in which the spread of pornography is affecting the perception of gender by young people.

Some measures could help to improve the situation, including:

- **Monitor** the implementation of existing provisions in **European law on sex discrimination and incitement to hatred on the grounds of sex.**
- Develop **awareness actions on Zero-tolerance across the EU for sexist insults** or degrading images of women and girls in the media.
- Adopt or revised European and national legislation with a view to **regulate the use of girl-child images** in public space, the media, advertising and commercials.
- Lead **training and awareness training actions with media professionals** on the harmful effects of gender stereotypes and good practices in this area.
- Research on the **links between child pornography and adult pornography** and the impacts on girls, women, boys and men, as well as the relationship between pornography and sexual violence.

Conclusion

Gender stereotyping starts as early as infancy and needs therefore to be tackled in the earliest stages of life for both girls and boys. Children often try to conform to parents or other adults' expectations; they perceive these expectations and adapt their behaviour accordingly. If the gender roles they observe around them in their families, attitudes, images, school material etc convey traditional gender roles and stereotypes on what girls and boys "should" be or do, it is likely that they will try to fit as much as possible with this model, hereby continuing the cycle of inequalities between women and men throughout the life cycle. A concerted and coordinated action in different areas, including awareness raising of parents, pressure and education directed at industry such as media, toy or clothing manufacturers, reform of education systems and material and new legislation concerning the media is therefore highly necessary. This requires a reformation of the whole society, only changes in many different levels and the cooperation of all concerned actors will support such a change, but the political will at the highest level is central to this change and EWL very much hopes that the conference organised by the Slovenian Presidency will be a step in this direction. The mission is possible!