

Equinet High-Level Seminar on Gender Equality

Gender Equality in the Labour Market: the role of Equality Bodies (Thursday – 27 June 2013)

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On 27 June Equinet organised its first High-Level Seminar on Gender Equality in Brussels, focusing on discussions on *Gender Equality in the Labour Market and the role of Equality Bodies*. The seminar was attended by senior management and experts of national equality bodies, representatives of EU institutions and agencies, other international organisations, national and European NGOs, academic and legal experts, social partners and other institutions active in the field of gender equality. The seminar offered participants the opportunity to enhance their skills and develop their expertise through active involvement, networking and information exchange.

In his opening address **Mr. Jozef De Witte** (Chair of the *Equinet Board* and Director of the *Belgian Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism*) emphasised the importance of the topic and gave information about the forthcoming Equinet gender training that will take place in Lisbon on 18-19 September 2013¹. Following Mr. De Witte, **Mr. Michel Pasteel** (Director of the *Belgian Institute for the Equality of Women and Men*, the host organisation of the seminar) underlined the significance of the seminar's topic as the majority of complaints on gender discrimination that his institution deals with are linked with the labour market. He emphasised the mission of the Institute and its efforts to close the gender pay gap and reinforce equality between women and men.

Following the opening address, **Prof. Francesca Bettio** (coordinator of the European Network of Experts on Gender Equality and co-author of "*The Impact of the economic Crisis on the Situation of Women and Men and on Gender Equality Policies*") gave a **KEYNOTE PRESENTATION** on "*Gender equality and the crisis and the role of equality bodies*". She presented findings on unemployment rates and pay gap statistics and the way they were impacted by the crisis. She also presented the unintended consequences of fiscal consolidation and made several recommendations on issues beyond the crisis, including gender budgeting, the need to prioritise social and care infrastructures.

After Prof. Bettio's presentation, some **VIDEOS OF CAMPAIGNS ON GENDER EQUALITY FROM NATIONAL EQUALITY BODIES** have been showed, underlining the awareness-raising role they have for national societies.

¹ Reserved only for representatives of Equinet member equality bodies

The **FIRST SESSION** of the legal seminar was dedicated to EU Institutions and Equality Bodies. **Mr. Andreas Stein** (Head of the Equal Treatment Legislation Unit in the European Commission's DG Justice) gave a keynote presentation on the current legal and policy developments on gender equality. Mr. Stein also informed the participants on the Commission's proposal for a Directive on gender balance among non-executive directors of companies. He informed the participants on new statistics that show that female participation among company board members has increased, underlining how most of the progress is caused by regulations by Member States. Mr. Stein stated that the Commission is highly committed to gender equality and concluded by underlining the importance of shedding some light on the root causes of the pay gap and combating procedural obstacles to equal pay, including by touching on the lack of transparency of pay systems.

Mr. Mikael Gustafsson (Chair of the European Parliament's - EP - Women's Rights and Gender Equality Committee) presented to the participants the EP's current work and key priorities on gender equality and the role for equality bodies, including a priority attention to violence against women, care issues, gender balance, and gender equality in the labour market.

Mr. Gustafsson mentioned that in his view gender equality bodies are among the most important players in ensuring and promoting women's rights at different levels of society. He added that they should be empowered to combat gender inequality effectively by being provided with adequate funding and having the mandate to adequately support victims. They should also be able to provide independent service and have legal powers to impose sanctions and fines. Later on he analysed how important it is for Member States to introduce and implement legislation in order to allow both men and women to participate in the labour market on an equal footing.

Ms. Thérèse Murphy (Head of Operations at the European Institute for Gender Equality - EIGE, presented EIGE's perspective on equality bodies and the advancement of gender equality. She analysed how the work of EIGE supports policy makers to make better informed policies through data collection tools, gender mainstreaming tools including gender trainings and database of statistics.

Ms. Sandra Ribeiro (President of the Portuguese Commission for Equality in Labour and Employment and Moderator of Equinet's Gender Equality Working Group - WG), presented the work of equality bodies on gender equality. She analysed the WG's focus areas of this year and presented the main fields of work of equality bodies on gender equality. She also presented how equality bodies are key actors for EU legislation on gender equality and how they have impact on many levels towards the achievement of gender equality. She underlined how such role can be fulfilled only when equality bodies are supported politically and economically.

The **SECOND SESSION** of the legal seminar was dedicated to Gender Equality in the Workplace. **Prof. Susanne Burri** (Coordinator of the European Network of Legal Experts in the field of Gender Equality and Associate Professor at the School of Law of Utrecht University) presented the work of equality bodies and their role and the legal developments in the field of gender equality. She gave an overall picture of the existing gender equality legislation and the role of equality bodies in the Gender Recast Directive and Self-employed Directive. Furthermore, she analysed the issues of paternal,

maternity and paternity leave and informed the participants on the proposal on gender balance in company boards.

Mr. Laurence Bond (Head of Research and Development at Ireland's Equality Authority) delivered a presentation on pregnancy and parenthood related discrimination as well as challenges and possible roles for equality bodies. Mr. Bond presented facts showing that pregnant workers are the most vulnerable to lose jobs especially in an economic crisis. The impact of the crisis and of austerity policies led to a very high percentage of pregnant women being dismissed. Mr. Bond noted that pregnant women are more likely not to take on legal proceedings when discriminated against and that is a specific challenge for NEBs.

Ms. Maria Karageorgou (Senior Investigator at the Greek Ombudsman) gave a presentation on challenges and possible roles for equality bodies in dealing with harassment and sexual harassment at work. She pointed out that it is very hard in practice to prove harassment cases mostly due to a lack of evidence and underlined how important it is for NEBs be trained to understand how to deal with harassment and the problem of underreporting.

The **THIRD SESSION** of the seminar featured an interactive panel debate moderated by **Clare Hockney** (UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission) and focused on the role of equality bodies in tackling the gender pay gap and implementing the provisions on equal pay. The panel featured **Ms. Maria Tomassetti** (Deputy Head of the Gender Equality Unit in the European Commission's DG Justice), **Mr. David Joyce** (European Trade Union Confederation), **Ms. Emma Ritch** (European Women's Lobby), and **Ms. Hildegard Van Hove** (Belgian Institute for the Equality of Women and Men). The debate revolved around ways that NEBs could pursue equal pay, tackle the problem of underreporting and gather the kind of evidence that can be used to prove and combat the pay gap. Panel participants agreed that NEBs play an important role in monitoring and reporting and by doing surveys and publishing reports they raise awareness and increase possibilities for access to justice. As far as the issue of underreporting is concerned participants noted that even if it is difficult to tackle directly, there are ways to make it happen, for example through campaigns and positive duties on employers.

Following the panel debate, **Ms. Anne Gaspard**, the Executive Director of Equinet, delivered the closing address and expressed her hope that the seminar provided participants and speakers with an interesting opportunity to exchange views and experiences, and to have an insight is part of the important work of equality bodies on gender equality in the labour market, as well as new ideas.

If you wish to know more about the event please check its [dedicated webpage](#) where you will find the detailed training program, most of the presentations and other useful material.

To keep up to date with the latest developments from equality bodies and Equinet, we encourage you to subscribe to our newsletter (from our [homepage](#)) and follow us on Facebook (facebook.com/EquinetEurope) and Twitter ([@equineteurope](https://twitter.com/equineteurope)).