

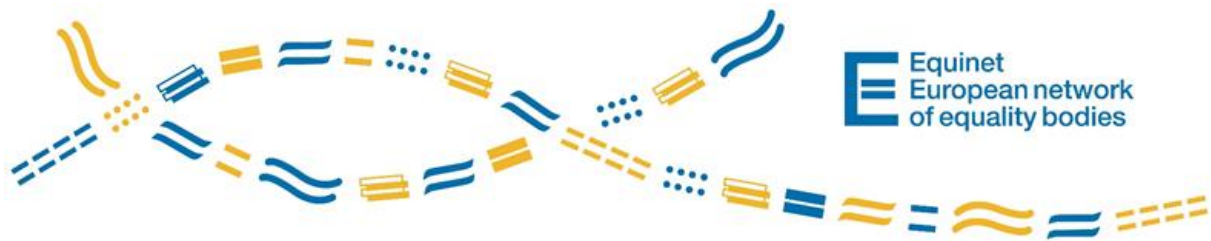


EQUINET Conference Taking Action for Gender Equality
Evelyn Collins – Opening Speech
Monday 23rd March 2015, Brussels

I would like to open this Equinet Conference on **Taking Action for Gender Equality** by welcoming all of you here today and by giving a particularly warm welcome to Vera Jourová, EU Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality – we are both delighted and honoured that you accepted our invitation to give the Keynote Address at this conference.

We all noted that Commissioner Jourová's statement to mark International Women's Day 2015 highlights that gender equality has been a goal since 1957, that it is part of the European Union's DNA – increasingly a European reality but with much remaining to be done. We take the Commissioner's presence with us today as a sign of her real commitment to advancing gender equality.

There can be no doubt about this commitment, having listened to the Keynote Address, and we appreciate very much Ms Jourová's openness in sharing information about many aspects of the Commission's work on gender equality. We also appreciate the purposive approach being taken to progress the range of issues highlighted and the concrete proposals that are emerging. We look forward to continuing engagement on advancing gender equality.

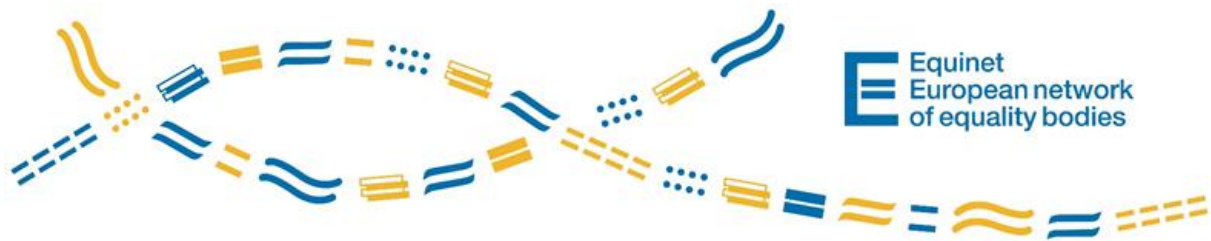


This conference aims to share equality bodies' experiences and expertise on gender equality with the broad range of EU stakeholders as well as facilitating discussions on future strategic priorities for advancing gender equality. I am pleased to see great representation from so many of Equinet members and our key partners.

It is clear that taking action for gender equality is a key concern for many across the EU – the Eurobarometer data published earlier this month showed that 91% of those surveyed agreed that tackling inequality between women and men is necessary to establish a fairer society; 76% believed that tackling such inequality should be a priority for the EU. This really does indicate the relevance of our work today.

As you all know, Equinet is the European network of equality bodies, bodies established to combat discrimination and advance equality at national level, many in direct response to the EU equal treatment directives – there are now 42 members from across 32 countries. The network promotes equality in Europe through supporting and enabling the work of national equality bodies. It supports equality bodies to be independent and effective as valuable catalysts for more equal societies.

Equinet works to a vision of a more equal Europe, a Europe where full equality in practice is achieved across grounds such as gender and gender identity, religion or belief, racial or ethnic origin, age, sexual orientation, and disability and where discrimination on such grounds is eliminated.



We have recently agreed the strategic objectives that will guide the work of the network over the next four years, set out in our Strategic Plan¹:

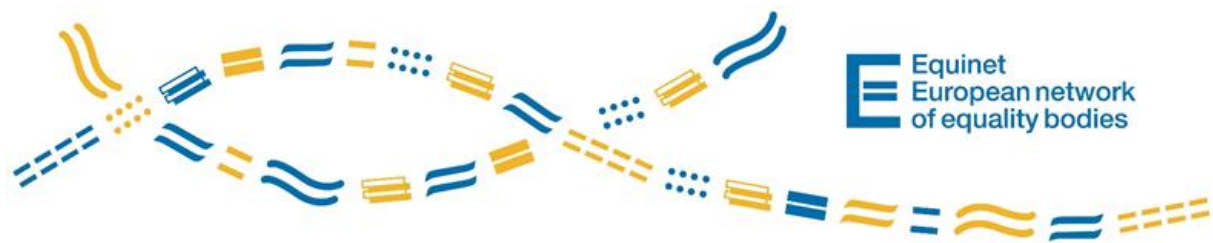
- building capacity and peer support of equality bodies;
- contributing to the European equality agenda;
- serving as a knowledge and communication hub on equal treatment;
and
- consolidating the network and the position of its members.

As part of our work to contribute to the European equality agenda, and in light of the review of the Gender Equality Strategy 2010 – 2015 and its renewal by the European Commission, we have been working to draw together evidence from the work of equality bodies on gender equality, to inform the preparation and, hopefully, the content of a new Strategy for Gender Equality.

This evidence has been collected in an Equinet Perspective [The Persistence of Discrimination, Harassment and Inequality for Women. The Work of Equality Bodies Informing a New European Commission Strategy for Gender Equality](#) which is in the conference packs.

The Perspective draws from a workshop of Equinet's Gender Equality Working Group and a survey of its member equality bodies which was responded to by 26 equality bodies working on gender equality across

¹ Equinet Strategic Plan 2015 -2018, available at www.equineteurope.org

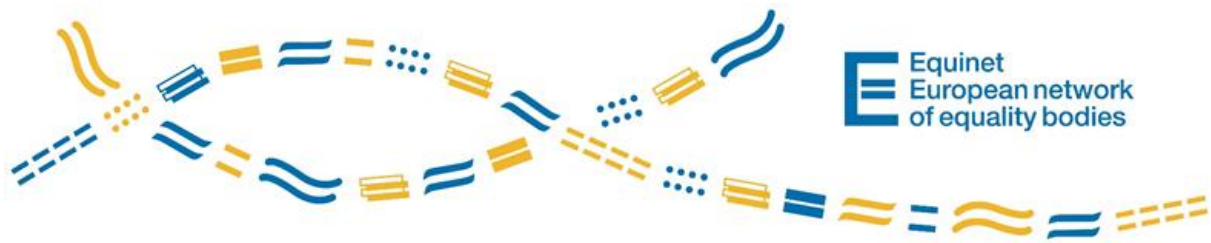


Europe. The findings will be presented and discussed during the Conference today.

It is clear that the work of equality bodies on gender equality is both rich and longstanding. You will see that, in the Draft Perspective, the work of the equality bodies is gathered and analysed under five different headings:

- Mainstreaming led initiatives: with a focus on equality bodies' work on equal pay, work-life balance and policy-making.
- Litigation led initiatives: with a focus on pregnancy related discrimination, harassment on the ground of gender and sexual harassment, and goods and services. This includes a focus on under-reporting of discrimination.
- Communication led initiatives: with a focus on addressing gender stereotypes.
- Activities in relation to men: with a focus on litigation, the role of men in gender equality, breaking stereotypes, and equality in the sphere of caring work.
- Activities in relation to trans people: with a focus on litigation, research and legal recognition of trans people.

Proposals for the new European Union Strategy for Gender Equality are set out based on this analysis of the work of equality bodies and on earlier Equinet initiatives such as in relation to violence against women, the gender goods and services Directive, work life balance, equal pay,



discrimination against trans people, and harassment on the ground of gender and sexual harassment.²

These proposals include the need for the new Strategy to address the challenge of stimulating a new priority for gender equality, finding new activities capable of engaging with the impact of austerity policies, and establishing further ways to measure progress on gender equality.

They include the need to continue work on the areas prioritised under the current gender equality strategy, such as :

- Gender budgeting and gender mainstreaming in policy-making, policy implementation and policy evaluation, in particular the Europe 2020 Strategy.
- Further legislation at European level in relation to the need for reconciliation between work and family life, including a comprehensive leave framework encompassing different forms of statutory leave (including paternity leave), rights in relation to flexible working arrangements and continued work on and adoption of the Maternity Directive.
- Action on violence against women including, in particular, harassment on the ground of gender and sexual harassment in the workplace, in education, and in the provision of goods and services.

² Query – do you want to put references in foot notes to this?



- Segregation in the labour market and unequal pay, with particular attention to transparency and the implementation of the European Commission recommendation on the gender pay gap.

They include the need to continue work on the horizontal issues prioritised under the current strategy, such as :

- The role and contribution of men in relation to gender equality.
- The elimination of discrimination, gaps in equal treatment legislation, realising the potential of equality bodies, and under-reporting of discrimination.
- The elimination of pregnancy-related discrimination in employment, including further legislation to secure the rights of pregnant women and their protection from discrimination.

New priority themes are also proposed as part of these proposals, including taking steps to address:

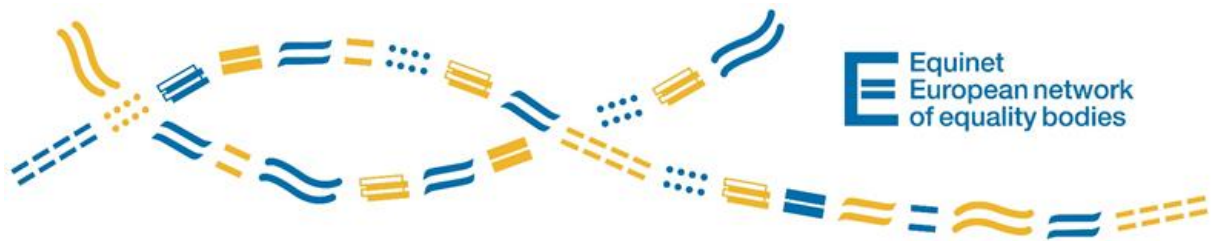
- Equality in the field of caring work including promoting workplace practice that is supportive of work-life balance, reversing the increased caring responsibilities on women as a result of austerity policies, the rights of domestic workers, and the role of men in caring work.
- Stereotyping on the ground of gender in the media, advertising, and education.
- Trans people, Intersex people, and gender identity/gender expression issues.



- Multiple discrimination where the ground of gender intersects with the grounds of age, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, and sexual orientation and with issues of poverty and of lone parenting.

The proposals also include a focus on the need to further develop the infrastructure for equality, in particular addressing:

- The inclusion of equality bodies in deliberation, decision-making and monitoring in relation to the Strategy at Member State and European levels.
- Developing standards at European level to ensure that the conditions are sufficiently created for equality bodies to achieve their full potential in their work on gender equality.
- Measures in equal treatment legislation that require equality action plans on the ground of gender by employers and service providers; that strengthen and support positive action on the ground of gender by employers and service providers; and that require public bodies to have due regard to gender equality in carrying out their functions.
- In the absence of such measures, the new Strategy could promote and support the preparation and implementation of equality action plans on the ground of gender on a voluntary basis by employers and service providers; ensure clarification and a broader interpretation as to when positive action can be used and to what extent; and promote and support gender mainstreaming at a national level.



Each of the sessions today will explore these issues in more detail and Equinet will be finalising the Perspective following this event and the contributions made today.

I want now to emphasise the importance of the work of equality bodies in advancing gender equality.

It is clear that equality bodies have great potential to effect change, for example social change, our work can and does impact on culture, attitudes and values in Member States, it can help to ensure that gender equality and non discrimination are highly prized. Our work also contributes to organisational change, with employers, service providers and policy makers; and to change at the level of individuals, where we work to vindicate their rights. As highlighted in the European Commission Report on the implementation of the Gender Recast directive, the active role of gender equality bodies in providing independent assistance to victims of discrimination helps them gain access to justice and ensures the effectiveness of the legal framework³.

It is also clear that there are some barriers acting as impediments to NEBs reaching their full potential, such as gaps in powers and functions – the same report also noted that *the tasks and powers of national gender equality bodies are very diverse and it is only in some Member States that the role of equality bodies includes representing individuals in claims.*⁴ Other barriers include limitations to their independence, for example in

³ Reference needed

⁴ Reference needed



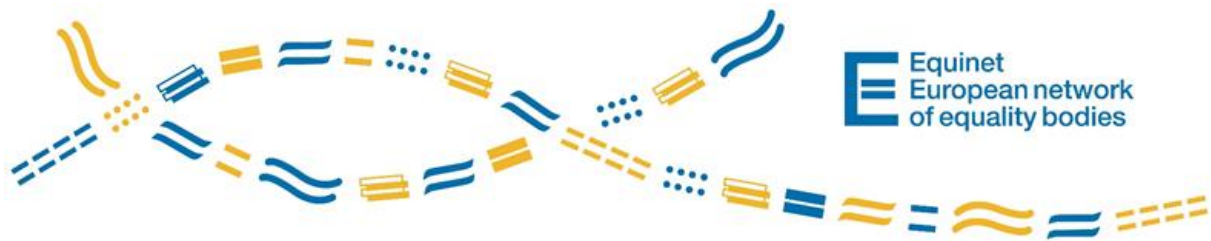
respect of legal structure, accountability, board/staff appointments and leadership. It also includes limitations to their effectiveness, for example in respect of resources, particularly in times of austerity, accessibility, stakeholder engagements and, for some, the absence of a strategic approach.

At the EU level, the need for standards for National Equality Bodies has been emerging over the recent period, through various studies and reports - standards both to promote and protect the independence of equality bodies and to promote and protect their effectiveness.

For example, The Joint Report on the Racial Equality Directive and the Employment General Framework Directive concluded that :
‘Strengthening the role of the national equality bodies as watchdogs for equality can make a crucial contribution to more effective implementation and application of the Directives. Enhancing the effectiveness of equality bodies and allowing them to reach their full potential could go a long way towards promoting equal treatment in a way that is easily accessible to everyone in the EU and faster as well as less costly than enforcement through courts for all the parties concerned (including Member States).’⁵

The definition of common standards on independence and effectiveness for equality bodies would indeed go a long way in ensuring greater equality, including gender equality, throughout the EU. Equinet is

⁵ Reference needed – the Joint Report



committed this year to advancing the development of European standards for equality bodies through the work of a thematic cluster.

We trust that this work will be of value to the Commission in furthering its commitment to promoting equality across the EU, it is clear that the European Commission is a longstanding supporter of the work of equality bodies and of course of gender equality. We trust, too, that the work produced in our Perspective on [The Persistence of Discrimination, Harassment and Inequality for Women. The Work of Equality Bodies Informing a New European Commission Strategy for Gender Equality](#) is also helpful to informing the Commission's work to advance gender equality.