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Ladies and gentlemen,

Sustainable development depends on rational management of human, natural and economic resources, geared to meeting basic human needs.

How can we claim to be managing human resources rationally when the capacities and talents of half of humankind are being ignored? And when there is an uneven balance of power between women and men in controlling resources and profits and in decision-making?

Sustainable development is impossible without sustainable equality between women and men.

Despite their better school and academic results, women are still subjected to discrimination in employment and encounter difficulties in reconciling their private, family and working lives. They are paid less than men for the same work or work of equal value – the wage gap is still an average 20% - and more women than men suffer poverty and unemployment.

Despite everything, despite all the international undertakings, the national legislation and policies to promote equality and civil society action, women are still marginalised in political and public life. The average representation of women in lower or single houses of parliament in Europe is 19.3%. Only three of the 47 Council of Europe member States have achieved balance in representation of the sexes – a minimum 40% for each sex, as set out in Recommendation (2003) 3 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe – and seven others are at the 30% threshold.

The worst expression of such inequalities and the uneven balance of power between women and men is violence, of which women are the primary victims. This is a serious violation of their fundamental rights. They suffer all kinds of violence and may be subjected to practices which qualify as torture or inhuman and degrading treatment, such as physical or sexual violence, rape, female genital mutilation or so-called “honour” killings.

The Council of Europe is working to eliminate these gender-based discriminations, promote balanced participation by women and men in political and public life, combat all forms of violence against women and encourage gender mainstreaming in all programmes and policies. It has paved the way by defining such concepts as “democratic parity” and developing such strategies as gender mainstreaming, including gender budgeting.

This action naturally dovetails with promoting and protecting human rights, democracy and social justice, and is a Council of Europe priority. The declarations and action plans adopted by the Heads of State and Government at the Council of Europe Summits have constantly hammered home the point that equal and sustainable participation by women in the life of society is a vital component of democracy.

Such consistent and innovative action has helped move issues such as balanced participation by women and men in decision-making and violence against women to the top of the governments’ political agendas.

It has enabled us, via an holistic approach, to create a solid legal framework – including the Council of Europe Convention against Trafficking in Human Beings and the draft

Council of Europe Convention to Combat Violence against Women, including Domestic Violence, the first European human rights treaty in this field, which cover prevention of trafficking and violence, the protection of victims and prosecution of the offenders – and to devise tools and strategies for achieving genuine equality between women and men.

Thanks to this ongoing action, the equality concept is now commonly used in the analysis of public policies, and the *Council of Europe Recommendation on gender equality standards and mechanisms* provides member States with an important roadmap for the implementation of the requisite mechanisms and strategies to achieve viable and sustainable results in the equality field.

The Council of Europe is also continuing with the gradual implementation of gender mainstreaming in all its programmes and activities in order to achieve gender equality and promote the process of social and cultural evolution which equality dictates. It is doing so in co-operation with players at the different levels of governance – the steering committees involved in intergovernmental co-operation, the Parliamentary Assembly, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations – in order to bring equality out of its isolation and make it central to the preparation of the different policy decisions and their implementation processes. In particular, the gender budgeting strategy, a gender mainstreaming tool which the Council of Europe has been promoting since the late 1990s, is now considered by many States as a vital component of equality policies, which are now taking on greater weight in the context of the current financial, economic and social crisis.

However, the “equal treatment” approach is insufficient, because even if women are treated in the same way as men, they still have to accept and adapt to male norms and operate according to male rules in the public sphere. Despite obvious progress, many people still take their decisions in line with, and tailor their conduct to, the traditional roles and attitudes expected of women and men. The socio-economic, political and cultural structures which cause discrimination are seldom challenged. Stereotypes still constitute a major obstacle to female advancement, and are in fact the root cause of the discrimination against them.

An even greater effort is needed to fully implement equality principles and standards if we are to ensure positive and lasting changes in the lives of women and men and bridge the gap between *de jure* and *de facto* equality in both the Council of Europe and the member States. The challenges still to be met if equality is to be indissociable from sustainable development of society have now been clearly identified.

One challenge is the status of equality as an integral part of the fundamental rights and a basic criterion for democracy. In 1988, in a Declaration on Equality between Women and Men, the Committee of Ministers affirmed that equality was an integral part of the fundamental rights and constituted a fundamental criterion for democracy. It reaffirmed these principles in the Declaration entitled "Making gender equality a reality", adopted in Madrid in May 2009.

Another challenge concerns equality as a factor in economic growth and social justice. Inequality is more expensive to society than equality. Women must play an increasingly important role in the economy, thus helping support, or indeed advance, the economic situation, while ensuring their own financial independence, and at the same time reducing their risks of poverty and social exclusion.

The third and last challenge is a societal one bound up with redefining the social roles of women and men freed from gender stereotyping.

The new thrusts of the Action Plan adopted at the 7th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Equality between Women and Men in Baku in May 2010 proposed taking up these challenges by deepening the reflection on the role of equality standards and mechanisms, exploring the possibilities for more effective use of such strategies as positive action and gender mainstreaming and combating gender stereotypes in education and in the media and other forms of discrimination against women.

The first step will be to analyse the existing situation in the priority sectors listed in the Action Plan where inequalities persist, in order to identify and disseminate good practices, conduct awareness campaigns and propose specific measures to the States, such as analysing the impact of the economic downturn on achieving *de facto* gender

equality and devising activities to counter the negative consequences of the downturn, particularly on the labour market, including abolishing inequalities in earnings. A further measure will involve developing activities to assess equality of access by women and men to justice at the national and international levels, particularly in the European Court of Human Rights, preparing an analysis of the data collected and, if necessary, developing awareness campaigns to promote women's access to justice.

It will also be a case of developing measures to promote the implementation of common European standards and mechanisms in the member States as set out in *Recommendation CM/Rec (2007) 17 on gender equality standards and mechanisms*, in line with the follow-up to the Beijing Action Programme. Care must also be taken here to monitor the implementation of existing recommendations, such as *Recommendation Rec (2003) 3 on balanced participation of women and men in political and public decision making*, *Recommendation Rec (2007) 13 on gender mainstreaming in education* and *Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)1 on the inclusion of gender differences in health policy*.

Lastly, we must identify and prepare the legal instruments required for developing standards to combat other forms of discrimination still facing women, such as a recommendation on equality for migrant women and girls, guidelines to prevent and combat all forms of discrimination against women and girls on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and a guide to best practice in promoting and defending the rights of women and girls with disabilities.

All these activities should be conducted with due regard to the initiatives emerging at the international level, particularly within the new United Nations body, "UN-Women", and the European Union. Close co-operation with these organisation and with civil society can only strengthen the relevance and efficiency of the Council of Europe action.

The Council of Europe has been able to create solid foundations for equality between women and men. These sound foundations will enable us to innovate by exploring other avenues and achieve genuine sustainable equality between women and men with a view to sustainable development.