



**EUROPEAN COUNCIL  
THE PRESIDENT**

**Brussels, 3 June 2010  
PCE 114/10**

**Speech by Herman Van Rompuy,  
President of the European Council,  
on the occasion of the  
10 years of the European Women Lawyers Association  
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It is an honour to address the European Women Lawyers Association on the occasion of your tenth anniversary. I salute the voluntary work that you so generously perform. You bring together women lawyers from across the EU and beyond. You help to improve EU legislation and its application and you promote fundamental rights and equality. This is European cooperation at its best, the civic life that fosters the bond between the Member States.

Allow me to begin by recalling the beginnings of equal treatment legislation in the Union. As you know better than anyone, the role played by members of your profession in this story cannot be underestimated! Through their pioneering actions, lawyers fighting for the cause of equality have changed our societies for the better.

In 1975, Article 119 of the old Treaty of Rome was successfully invoked to defend Gabrielle Defrenne. She was an air hostess working for Sabena, the Belgian national airline. With the help of Éliane Vogel-Polsky, an employment lawyer, Gabrielle Defrenne went before the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg to demand equal treatment. She successfully challenged the fact that she was paid less, just because she was a woman. She also helped to put an end to the airline's policy of forcing air hostesses to retire at the age of forty. It is a famous and inspiring piece of legal history.

Today, the rights stemming from the Defrenne case are an unshakable legacy for European women. As you know, the case led to the adoption of the first directives on gender equality at the EU level. That legislation now encompasses, not just equal pay and equal treatment at work, but also equal treatment in social security and the access to goods and services. Today, European families benefit from the minimum standards we have set in the area of maternity leave and parental leave. This acquis continues to evolve.

I am happy to say that equality between women and men is also strongly affirmed in the provisions of the new Lisbon Treaty. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union affirms "a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail". Article 3 says the Union shall promote equality between women and men. Finally, Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union specifies that this aim is to be pursued in all the Union's activities.

**P R E S S**

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These are not just lofty intentions. Gender equality has become part of the EU's daily perspective. This approach has a name: "gender mainstreaming". It is not new. It was already included in the Amsterdam Treaty. But perhaps it deserves to be better known still among men! Myself, I will be meeting with the gender equality ministers of the trio-Presidency (Spain, Belgium and Hungary) next week to discuss gender mainstreaming in the context of the European Council's work.

Both women and men have a stake in all EU policies. Those policies must serve the interests of both sexes, and help to promote equality. In order for this to happen, we must ensure that women participate in decision-making at all levels. I am proud to work with Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. I would like to see more women in top positions in the EU and in public life and in the professions.

Within the European Council, amongst the Heads of State and Government, the score is not so good. Of course, we have Chancellor Angela Merkel -- or Frau Merkel. Some say, she counts for two. And we have Dalia Grybauskaitė, from Lithuania (who also was for five years a European Commissioner). But one cannot make a European policy on the number of women in political leadership positions: it is decided by the national voters!

One should of course start close to home. My deputy Head of Cabinet is a woman and 40% of my policy advisors (6 out of 15) are women. We need more women at the highest political level. But also in company board rooms, not to mention banks! Here, too, your association is helping us to progress, making women's voices heard.

Gender equality is not a drain on our budgets or a social luxury. It is not something extra. Quite the contrary. Smart businesses have discovered decades ago that they need a diverse workforce in order to be at the forefront of innovation and creativity, to perform. Modern European societies cannot afford not to promote equality. If we deny women the chance to use their talents, we not only deny them the chance to fulfil their potential. We also lose an employee, a taxpayer, a scientist, an artist, a president or indeed a gifted lawyer.

The European Council has been forthright in its affirmation of gender mainstreaming. Allow me to highlight a decision that the European Council took recently. It concerns the Europe 2020 Strategy, which is being devised to ensure growth and jobs for our citizens in the decades to come. In March, the European Council agreed a set of headline targets for the Europe 2020 strategy. One of those targets is that 75% of women and men aged 20-64 should be employed. This goal is a concrete acknowledgement of the importance of equality on the labour market for the EU economy. The Member States will set their national targets based on their different starting positions, but it is clear that we need to boost women's employment in particular. Here, education is key. Already, more women than men in Europe complete university degrees.

The Europe 2020 Strategy is our response to a daunting list of global challenges. We must ensure Europe's competitiveness in a rapidly changing world. The environment is in peril and we need to ensure energy security while reducing emissions. Our population is ageing. In addition, we have faced a rapid succession of crises -- a global financial crisis, a recession and a public debt crisis. We need more structural growth to safeguard our European way of life.

In two weeks from today, the European Council will meet to endorse the Europe 2020 strategy in more detail. The strategy has been called a strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. As the President of the European Council, I say this: without the contribution of women, the Europe 2020 Strategy will be neither smart, nor sustainable, nor inclusive!

The European inclusive social model requires support through all relevant policies. We must help both women and men to balance work and family life. The EU is playing its part. The social partners and the Council have been negotiating proposals to raise the EU-wide minimum standards for parental leave and maternity leave. We are extending the social protection of self-employed workers, in order to encourage more women to be entrepreneurs. Men are assuming new roles. Maybe some of you here today have left your children at home in the care of their fathers. In my Cabinet, more than half of my staff, men and women, have young children at home. I am proud that they combine and enjoy their roles as professionals at work with their roles as parents at home.

When speaking of the roles and life choices of men and women, we must of course also acknowledge the diversity that exists between the twenty-seven Member States. One should not consider this just in terms of progressive versus backward approaches. This diversity also allows Europeans to constantly learn from one another, following the best examples. Here, as well, your association plays a major part. You foster dialogue and you give shape to a Union of shared values, of mutual learning and cooperation.

Let me add as a final political remark that the European Union insists a lot on women's rights in contact with other countries. Whenever it is possible, at a Summit with third countries, I try to raise the issue. In fact, tomorrow we are having a summit between the Union and Pakistan, here in Brussels. We will ask the Pakistani government to protect the rights of women -- not just in law but also in daily life. It will no doubt not be the last time... but we do what we should do!

Europe can be proud of the steps it has taken to promote equality between women and men. Gender equality is a European value enshrined in law. But legislation in itself is not enough. We also need a thriving civil society to give life to the letter of the law. We need active European citizenship. We need experts, and we need them to come together at the European level in organisations such as yours.

I wish you a productive day. I congratulate you for the achievements during the past ten years. I know that Europe will continue to benefit from your work in the years to come.

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