

Opening remarks, Gender Equality Conference, Belgrade 8 March 2012

I am very happy to have been given the opportunity to participate in today's promotion of an issue that Sweden holds close to its heart – the issue of gender equality. The Swedish reputation of a champion in gender equality has been earned through years and decades of unfaltering effort and commitment. But it's a continuous journey, and we're by no means done yet.

Sometimes I hear people say, we don't have time for gender issues now. We are working on more important things, like democratisation or economic development. I would say, you don't have time to ignore gender issues. I truly believe that gender equality is a very important element in the overall, successful democratisation of a country. And for achieving economic development. Worldwide experience teaches us that only reforms which include adequate considerations of gender equality lead to the desired transformation of a society. A Society on its way to modernity and well-functioning efficiency. Therefore no one has the luxury to ignore gender issues.

Gender equality is of course a goal in itself, but also a prerequisite for long-term democratic development. It is a prerequisite for equitable and sustainable global development. These are the values that we would like to see being shared and transferred from one generation to another in today's global society.

The topic of today's conference is extremely relevant. The encouragement of women's participation in public life is indeed one of the key factors that distinguishes democratic societies and well-functioning economies from those where gender roles are set in traditional ways. Hey, I won't only call them traditional! I'll name old ways of looking at gender roles the same as we name ancient medicinal practices, or old technology: outdated, old-fashioned, inefficient and even dangerous. We don't use them anymore, we have evolved.

Women's involvement in political processes cannot be viewed in isolation from women's economic empowerment. The two go hand in hand. They create the interplay between equal access and decision-making that provide the key instrument to a truly democratic society.

We all need to make a concerted effort to eradicate inequalities that exist across the board, in all segments of life. We need to find ways to involve more women in political processes and policy dialogue. Political representation includes the proportion of women and men in politics at national and local level. But it also involves their actual ability to exert power and influence when it comes to decision-making, legislation and conflict management. Inclusion of more women in political representation makes them an important agent of change in a society. This can be done through promoting women's voting and participation in party lists, promoting the right of women to meet, organise and form associations and promoting safety, protection and security for politically active women.

The National Strategy for Improving the Position of Women and Promoting Gender Equality identifies women's participation in decision-making processes one of its priority pillars. Sweden is fully committed to supporting the Ministry and the Gender Equality Directorate in its implementation.

The success of this multi-dimensional reform process lies in active participation of all relevant stakeholders, including all sectors and all levels of governance, civil society and the international community. However, the ultimate success depends on the changes that each and every one of us makes in their lives. So let us all take a small step to change the society in which we live for the better by giving our personal contribution to this important cause.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you all the best in your future work.