

## International Women's Day: Seizing the momentum behind gender equality

Written by Věra Jourová on 8 March 2019 in Opinion  
Opinion

On International Women's Day, we can be proud of what has been achieved, but there is no reason to be complacent, writes Věra Jourová.



**Photo Credit: Natalie Hill**

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There is a strong momentum behind gender equality at the moment. Employment rates for women are at historically-high levels in the EU and more women than ever before are in positions of power.

Recently, we agreed our Work-Life Balance Directive - the first EU gender equality legislation in a decade.

Women's rights and saying no to violence is the focus of attention, through women's marches and the

#MeToo movement. This puts us in a strong position. Yet progress in gender equality remains slow and the differences stark.

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For example, only 6.7 percent of CEOs in the EU are female. Although this has doubled since 2012, the starting point was - and remains - embarrassingly low.

While we see positive signs, I am also deeply concerned by claims of increases in gender-based violence and lack of justice for women when they do suffer violence, as well as women's health and reproductive rights being undermined in some EU countries.

Change requires strong and sustained political commitment at all levels as well as support from all citizens. We put gender equality at the heart of our work, both in the EU and further afield. Gender equality is a fundamental value that we have brought into the mainstream in all policy areas.

Recently, we agreed new EU work-life balance rules. New fathers in the EU will have the right to take at least ten working days to around the birth of their child. Men and women alike will now have the right to carer's leave of five days per year. Women will be able to remain in the labour market allowing businesses to make better use of their talent and men can have a bigger role in caring and family.

This change was drastically needed to address low levels of female participation in the labour market. The EU must make best use of all human resources in meeting the demographic challenge.

"While we see positive signs, I am also deeply concerned by claims of increases in gender-based violence and lack of justice for women when they do suffer violence, as well as women's health and reproductive rights being undermined in some EU countries"

Tackling the gender pay gap was high on my agenda. We saw this was static, with a gap of around 16 percent between women and men's salaries for the past decade. In November 2017, we adopted an Action Plan to address the gender pay gap in a more comprehensive manner - including increasing transparency.

We are also looking at the Equal Pay legislation at EU level to see whether implementation of 'equal pay for equal work' need to be updated. Another of my top priorities was gender-based violence.

This is a pervasive, international problem with no place in society. In the EU, one in three women has

experienced either physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15; more than half of women have experienced sexual harassment.

All women risk violence at some point in their life, be it at home, work, school or in public spaces. Yet it remains a taboo topic. This required dedicated effort, so I made 2017 'Year of Focused Actions to Combat Violence Against Women.' This aimed to educate and raise awareness, encourage national and cross-border collaboration and make a concrete impact through funding grassroots projects.

We made €15m available and launched the 'Non - No - Nein' communication campaign. I was proud to see excellent projects during this Year of Focused Actions. Italy used major football stadiums, televised matches and football programmes to reach men and boys with the message that violence against women is unacceptable.

Doctors and nurses in Finland were trained to recognise signs of violence, to encourage disclosure and reporting and to raise awareness of support services, while the policy academy in Cyprus incorporated specific training on violence against women in its curriculum, with a focus on registering complaints, investigation and prosecution.

"As my mandate as Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Equality draws to its end, I am proud with what we have achieved, but I cannot say I am content with the situation of gender equality in Europe"

The EU signed the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence; we are now in the process of concluding the EU's accession. We can have a coherent focus on protecting victims of gender-based violence in line with international standards.

The European elections are fast approaching. As we look forward, we must urgently address gender equality in political leadership. As politicians, we should be representative of the population; this should be reflected in those that represent us.

I encouraged Member States and political parties to increase the number of women candidates - currently only about a third of MEPs are women. I would also like to see more female Commissioners - we only have nine females out of 28. We need to come close to parity.

We also need better gender balance among the President and Vice-Presidents - currently, there is only my colleague Federica Mogherini among these seven. Achieving gender equality is about making fundamental rights a reality for all.

As my mandate as Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Equality draws to its end, I am proud with what we have achieved, but I cannot say I am content with the situation of gender equality in Europe.

We have cast the net for change. I see the chance now for real change. So, now we must seize it with both hands."

### **About the author**

Věra Jourová is European Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality

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