

UK – TND 1 EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR MEN AND WOMEN

We align ourselves with the statement made by Finland on behalf of the European Union and its Member States and would like to add some remarks in our national capacity.

The United Kingdom is committed to tackling gender discrimination and to achieving equality at home and overseas. We are working toward a fairer society by improving equality and reducing discrimination and disadvantage for all, at work, in public and political life, and in people's life choices.

But as the annotated agenda for this working session notes, despite advances being made towards gender equality, women remain under-represented in public institutions in many OCSE participating States. Women's rights will never be fully realised if gender stereotypes that limit the role of women are allowed to take hold. In the UK there is real public concern that stereotypes about girls reinforce their sense that certain activities and interests are 'not for them'. This is clearly wrong. People should be free to develop their own interests and talents, provided they do not harm others. Such stereotyping is a major factor in women's economic disadvantage and can lead to an under-representation of women in public office. We must work to challenge these attitudes whenever and wherever they arise.

This is not about political correctness. It is about the unjustness of discriminatory attitudes but is also about economic reality. There is a strong business case for encouraging women's equal participation in political and economic life. When women's opportunities are suppressed, we harm our prospects of fulfilling our full economic potential. We need to address barriers faced by women and girls. We need structural change to ensure our

workplaces in both public and private sectors are environments of equal opportunity.

We do not claim in the UK to have all of the answers. Indeed we recognise that we still face significant challenges in ensuring genuine equality. But one initiative that we have introduced is perhaps worthy of sharing as possible good practice. Think, Act, Report is a voluntary scheme to promote greater transparency around gender equality in the workplace. The scheme encourages companies to do exactly those things: to think about how to offer equal opportunities, to take action where a need for action is identified and to report their progress. Over 2.2 million employees are now working in organisations signed up to the scheme. Experience to date has been that this amongst other schemes has played an important role in ensuring that women and men are supported to make the fullest contribution that they are able.

Madam Moderator,

We in the UK together with all other participating States must recommit to gender equality in word and deed. We must ensure that abuses of women's rights and opportunities, including acts of violence are promptly and thoroughly addressed. We should ensure that boys and men also play an active role as partners in challenging discrimination against women and girls. We welcome the Swiss Chairmanship's intention to pursue an addendum to the 2004 OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality and hope that it achieves consensus.

Thank you

