Ministers, distinguished guests, delegates

In February I had the honour to chair a debate at the EPSCO Council of Employment and Social Ministers on the the Europe 2020 Agenda and the Semester process. The Irish Presidency had specifically requested Ministers to identify policy measures that might be developed to overcome the obstacles preventing women from participating in the labour market.

In their responses Ministers agreed that women represent an untapped resource for growth in Europe and female employment also offers protection against the risk of poverty. They also accepted, however, that women continue to face barriers to entry into the labour market and entrepreneurship.

I would like at this opening event to touch briefly on three of the issues that were the focus of attention in that debate -

- Closing the employment gap
- Meeting the skills challenge
- Boosting female entrepreneurship

Closing the Employment Gap

There is a marked divergence in male and female employment rates in Ireland. In the last quarter of 2012 females had an employment participation rate of 52.4% compared to 67.3 % for males.

The employment rate gap has been reduced by almost half from 16 percent in 2008 to 9 percentage points in 2012.
This reduction is not necessarily because of an improvement in the situation of women. Instead it reflects the stronger impact of the crisis on men due to the sectoral distribution of job losses. Men have fared very differently to women, losing jobs in greater numbers, remaining unemployed in greater numbers, and exiting the workforce in larger numbers.

In Ireland we have seen a marked increase in women’s significance as earners within their households and a shift away from the traditional pattern whereby women withdrew from the labour force in larger numbers than men with the onset of recessionary conditions.

On a European level, data from the March European Jobs Monitor published by Eurofound, would suggest that the recession can be seen as accelerating the catch-up process of women in the labour market, both in terms of employment numbers and access to higher layers of the employment structure.

Women have increased their employment share, particularly in ‘mid-paid’ and ‘good’ jobs. In part, this has been because women are overrepresented in certain growing sectors such as health and underrepresented in declining sectors. But it also reflects higher levels of educational attainment by women at a time when qualifications are an even more important requisite for access to better quality jobs.

Skills: the challenge

Building skills is crucial for increasing employment among women. Removing obstacles to increased participation by women in the labour market is crucial for increasing overall employment.

When I hosted an Informal Council of Employment Ministers here in Dublin in early February, I drew attention to the relatively low participation of women in the ICT workforce, despite the employment opportunities presented by the ICT sector.

Women comprise only 30% of the ICT workforce in Europe. Women are under-represented at all levels in the ICT sector, especially in decision-making positions. The ICT sector is rapidly growing and creating around 120,000 new jobs every year.

We need to attract more women into ICT jobs in order to ensure equality of opportunities and to empower them to participate fully in the information society. One of the objectives of the Grand Coalition for Digital Jobs, which I helped to launch in Brussels in early March, is to find new ways of encouraging girls to take up careers in ICT and to show them the opportunities on offer.

In spite of national and EU-level strategies on gender equality, European research still suffers from a considerable loss and inefficient use of highly skilled women.

In the European Union, men’s and women’s access to science in schools and universities has improved considerably. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for women’s access to scientific careers.

Women account today for almost 60% of university degrees in Europe, and they achieve excellent grades, better on average than their male counterparts. However, their presence at the top of scientific and academic careers is sparse. Only 18% of full professors in Europe are women. Women
account for only 13% of heads of higher education institutions and 22% of board members in research decision-making.

The low numbers of women in decision making positions throughout the science and technology system is a waste of talent that European economies cannot afford.

Supporting Women in Business

Following on from the commitment made in the 2012 Action Plan for Jobs to design, and launch a promotional drive for women in business with an emphasis on start-ups, Enterprise Ireland will implement a range of female entrepreneurship initiatives in 2013. Enterprise Ireland will work with women in business networks and conduct research into the development of female entrepreneurship.

This initiative will complement the mentoring and networking opportunities which County Enterprise Boards (CEBs) already support at local level. These networks bring women who are already successfully running their own businesses together with women who aspire to emulate them. The networks provide an ongoing programme of activities on business-related topics such as insurance, taxation, etc. In 2012, the CEBs provided training supports to over 16,000 female entrepreneurs, while almost 2,300 women availed of mentoring services through the CEBs.

I would like to congratulate Minister Allan Shatter and Minister of State Kathleen Lynch and the Department of Justice and Equality on hosting this Presidency conference on "Women’s economic engagement in the context of Europe 2020". I look forward to hearing the outcome of your deliberations and I am confident that your discussions here can help to advance our shared objective of implementing a gender mainstreamed approach to reaching the Europe 2020 headline targets.

ENDS