Dear guests,

I am delighted that so many of you have travelled to Ireland and to Dublin to take part in this important Conference. Minister Lynch already alluded to the changes which have come about for women in Irish society and the contribution which membership of the European Union made to equality and particularly gender equality in Ireland.

This year we mark the 40th anniversary of Ireland’s membership. This is our seventh Presidency. We, in Ireland like to believe that we have always worked as good Europeans, and we have tried continuously to play an active role across all of the EU institutions. Irish colleagues, male and female, have occupied some of the top positions in the European institutions.

At a national level, we have had two women Presidents in recent times, who together served for 21 years. In my own field of justice, the three most senior positions of Chief Justice, Attorney General and Director of Public Prosecutions are all held currently by outstanding women. Women’s labour market participation here in Ireland had reached the Lisbon target prior to the economic downturn in 2008. Population growth and the economic downturn mean that the Europe 2020 employment targets are now more challenging for us.

We know that this situation is replicated in many Member States. We are here to discuss how we can look to the future and ensure Europe’s economic growth and competitiveness by collaborating to encourage the full participation of women in the labour market.

The achievement of de facto gender equality is complex and goes far beyond a body of law. We need to promote awareness and change attitudes. Gender equality is a human and democratic right. But, as is now being acknowledged more and more by politicians and policy-makers, by economists and academics, it is also a prerequisite for economic growth, prosperity and social inclusion.
When, nearly twenty years ago, the women of the world gathered in Beijing for the Fourth World Conference of Women they discussed a wide range of issues. Some were directly related to human rights, but the outcome document from that Conference, the Beijing Platform for Action, identified twelve areas of concern for women globally. The Beijing Platform is still regarded by all UN Member States as the blueprint for the advancement of gender equality. The key theme of Beijing is, of course, “the advancement of women in all fields of society and in all roles”.

A number of the Beijing areas of concern are interlinked and link with our theme here today. Some link to a basic human right – poverty, education etc. - and then develop the theme so that it also becomes an economic issue or a social inclusion issue, which weave together into a global plan.

To show you my perception of these inter-linkages, I am going to ask that you reflect on just five of these critical areas of concern from Beijing:

- Women and poverty
- Education and training of women
- Women and the economy
- Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women and
- Women and the media

The International Labour Organisation talks about “good jobs” and “better jobs”. In most, if not all Member States, young women have achieved higher standards in education than young men, which should, but does not always, enable women to have better jobs, and by implication, which should but does not always enable them to avoid poverty, particularly in their older years.

Women having jobs, and especially “better jobs”, enables them
- to be more economically productive,
- to have an increased standard of living,
- to contribute more as taxpayers,
- to offer a high standard of education to their children and
- to build up pension entitlements to avoid the risk of poverty in their older years.

These women
- increase their country’s economic output and its tax take,
- foster the economic prosperity of the next generation and
- reduce the risk of their dependency on the State in their older years.

I am sure you will agree that this is a “win-win” situation for women, for the economy and for society.

This potential “win-win” situation is the reason why the Irish Presidency has chosen the topic of the Economic Engagement of Women for our Presidency conference. We believe that the time is ripe to discuss the linkages between gender equality and employment and are delighted that the European Commission endorsed this view and has joined the Irish Presidency in funding this Conference.

We know that, across the European Union, over 46 million women of working age are outside the labour market. Some may have interrupted their careers to have children – an equally important role, both for the economic and social well being of our Union. However, many opt, for a diversity of reasons, not to
return to the labour market. This decision impacts on their long term economic independence and may lead to poverty in their older years, if they have not made adequate pension provision.

I mentioned two other Beijing areas of concern previously. These are “institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women” and “women and the media”. These institutional mechanisms begin at the highest levels and cut across all sectors.

To foster the advancement of women, it is therefore essential that Member State governments as policy makers recognise their role in fostering gender equality. More importantly, it is essential that we recognise the existence of these linkages between gender equality, economic growth and social inclusion and actively foster policies which cross over all three areas.

Member States must ensure that employment policies and gender equality policies are not developed in isolation but in a coherent manner to enhance both decisions and outcomes.

I am pleased to hear that the Lithuanian Presidency intends to look further at the broader range of institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women in the context of the Beijing Platform. These mechanisms include Governments, their executive, the national equality bodies and civil society.

A further strand of work linking the Beijing themes, our Irish Presidency and this conference is the area of concern on “women and the media”. The media can be very influential in promoting public awareness and therefore can play a central role in fostering gender equality and the advancement of women.

You may be aware that my Department has collaborated with the European Gender Institute on a study of women in decision-making roles in the media and will present Council Conclusions for agreement by EU Ministers in June.

I am mindful of just two articles I have seen in the last fortnight in the Irish media. One of our national newspapers ran an article about steps which can be taken to encourage girls into IT. On the same day, another of our national papers ran an article with a personal story encouraging women to move out of abusive relationships.

These are just random examples but they can have a massive influence on personal lives and on national issues. The media help to form public opinion and can play a central role in eliminating the stereotypes which impact on women in so many ways.

These stereotypes remain as one of the central challenges to the achievement of de facto gender equality in the workplace and in decision-making at all levels. Accordingly, the persistence of stereotypes can prevent women from achieving their optimal roles in employment and this of course impacts on their productive output and by extension, on economic growth. I urge the media present to continue to play this constructive role in relation to the advancement of gender equality and the removal of stereotypes.

I would like to welcome you all to Dublin Castle. I would like to extend a particular welcome to Minister Algimanta Padebinskiene the Minister for Social Security and Labour from Lithuania and to the many speakers who have kindly agreed to share their views with us all over the course of the next day and a half.
I hope that the conference programme we have compiled, and the dialogue sparked by the contributions of our speakers, will energise the work on linkages between gender equality, employment and economic growth in the context of the Europe 2020 Strategy – as I mentioned before - a “win – win” for women, their families and our national and EU economy.

I hope that you both enjoy and profit from your short time in Dublin. Thank you for coming and thank you, in advance, for your active participation, which is so important if this Irish Presidency Conference on Gender Equality and Employment is to be a real success.

Thank you.

ENDS