

“The Gender Pay Gap: Can we make equal pay a reality?”

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Excellencies,

Colleagues and friends,

It is my great pleasure to welcome all of you today to this joint event of UNECE and the UN Library. I would like to express my gratitude to Mr. Francesco Pisano and his team for making it possible to host this event here at the UN Library.

I do have to admit, I wish there was no need for this event. I wish we could bridge the gender pay gap as easily as the children we have just seen in the video. Unfortunately, we are far from achieving full gender equality in the world of work.

We have taken first, important steps: we enshrined gender equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, most prominently in SDG 5. Now we have to strengthen our efforts to achieve this goal. It is my strong personal belief that we need to tackle gender inequalities in all areas, on all levels. This is why I have decided to become an International Gender Champion. This is also why I have committed to raise awareness for equal pay for work of equal value.

With this event today, we raise awareness of the unequal pay of men and women. The Equal Pay Day is a symbolic day. It shows how far into the year women must work to earn what men earned in the previous year. As the pay gap between men and women varies from country to country, so does the date of the Equal Pay Day. Today, on 26 March, France is marking its Equal Pay Day 2018.

Why is it important to talk about equal pay? Because every country in the UNECE region has a gender pay gap in favour of men. It is a persistent trend, and in many countries the wage gap is fluctuating around a high level. On average, women in the UNECE region earn 18,2 per cent less than men, which means women earn only 81,8 cents for every euro men earn. Globally, the gender pay gap is even higher, at 23 per cent.

The Gender Pay Gap does not only translate into large losses of earnings and worse living standards for women. It also contributes to women retiring with far less savings and a higher risk of living in poverty in retirement, compared to men.

Too little has changed in the past decades. Should we move ahead at the current rate, it will take more than 100 years to reach equal pay. We have committed ourselves in SDG 8.5 not to wait 100 years, but to take action now and close the gap in 12 years.

To move ahead and close the Gender Pay Gap, we need to understand where it comes from. There are different factors, but none is a justification.

Women still participate in labour markets on an unequal basis with men. Women tend to be over-represented in low-paying sectors, such as the social and health sectors. Society still values these sectors less than male dominated sectors.

Women are often under-represented in senior positions. In my own organisation, UNECE, in its 71 year long history, only two female Executive Secretaries preceded me, compared to eleven men.

The careers of women tend to be interrupted by long periods devoted to childcare. In many cases, women tend to work less hours in paid work as they are the ones assuming unpaid domestic and care responsibilities. In fact, maternity plays a crucial role: For every child a woman brings into the world, the gender pay gap increases. We should not accept this.

These are only a few factors that explain part of the Gender Pay Gap. However, there are also “unexplained factors”. That means decisions on pay are biased against women, both conscious and unconscious.

How can we tackle these issues?

We need to work in partnership, together with member States, the private sector, civil societies and academia. We need to take immediate actions to improve legislation and its implementation, accelerate voluntary measures and do more research to apply transformative policies that will make equal pay a reality.

My own organisation, UNECE, contributes to capacity building for women entrepreneurs in Eastern Europe and Central Asia to improve women’s skills and knowledge in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

To tackle unequal pay we need to know where we stand in every country and region. We need data, we need to monitor this data as we go ahead with actions. At UNECE we provide statistical information for our countries which allow us to compare and take respective policy measures.

UNECE also tries to lead by example by offering its staff flexible working arrangements, paternity leave and, most importantly, equal pay.

Much more needs to be done in all countries, at all levels. The most difficult change needs to take place at the individual level. We need to change our mind-set. We need to overcome our own unconscious bias. Only if we, men and women, are willing to change norms and cultures, will we make equal pay a reality.

Thank you.