



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Women in Aid

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to thank the organizers for inviting me, but also for inviting me in the year when the topic of discussion is women and aid. For us in Europe, both women and aid are very important on their own merit.

Women, because throughout history we came to realise that our countries can be much more prosperous by tapping into the full potential of all our people – men and women; that gender equality is simply good economics which raises the standard of living for everyone. By recognizing the diversity of the talents of men and women, we are achieving a more peaceful, harmonious and prosperous society in Europe.

We have not reached full gender equality. Some of our countries are doing better than others. And while the average numbers in Europe are impressive in terms of access to education, jobs, positions in politics and business, it is, as my professor in statistics used to say, "possible that your feet are in the oven, your head is in the refrigerator, and then your temperature is average, but you are dead". So, in Europe we still have countries, mine included, where we recognize there is a way to go in achieving gender equality, but we have embraced this road because we believe it is for everybody, for men and women.

Aid is also critical for us in Europe. We hold a strong commitment to helping people who face difficulties or strive to eradicate poverty around the world. The EU represents 20 % of the world economy, but 50 to 60 % of the global development assistance and humanitarian aid. And what is even more important, during the difficult last five years, when we went through a tough economic crisis, Europeans' support for humanitarian aid went up. It was very strong, 79 % at the beginning of the crisis, but now it is 88 %. This shows the empathy people in Europe feel for those who are in most dire need, but also it shows that when we as humans face difficulties, we tend to be more helpful to each other.

My responsibilities as Humanitarian Aid Commissioner are to mobilize and deliver support that reached 1.3 billion euros last year; this is about 1.7 billion dollars. With this money we helped more than 120 million people in need. The crisis that makes me lose sleep at night - as I am sure is the case for many of you - is the crisis in Syria. It is the worst humanitarian catastrophe of our times, but there are also other catastrophes: CAR, South Sudan, the Philippines, just to name a few that have been receiving support from the European Commission last year.

When we look ahead to the future, we see growing needs - because of the combined impact of more frequent and more devastating disasters, and because of conflicts that cause suffering. Due to these factors, the humanitarian community in the world struggles to meet growing needs.

And when we look at what needs to be done, quite naturally for us in Europe, our commitment to women and our commitment to aid come together. What does that mean? It means three things for us.

First, we are determined to work with our partners, to understand better the specific needs of women in emergencies, and the best way to support them when the worst happens. We know that women, just by our physical constitution, lack the strength that many of the men have. It is not a determining factor, but an important factor which explains why, when a natural disaster hits, women are overwhelmingly the majority of the victims. I was looking at statistics and maybe the most dramatic are the data from the tsunami 2004, where the women victims in different parts of the affected regions were between 60 and 80 % of those who died.

But we also know that women in conflicts suffer even greater injustice because they are targeted. Often they are part of the warfare; rape of women is a weapon of war.

And we also know that women in disasters and conflicts have the initial tendency to try to help, to protect their children, to protect the elderly. That puts a higher burdens on women, that we in the humanitarian community, as it was said very clearly this morning, we must strive more to recognise.

So, what do we do to be more effective in our humanitarian operations in terms of understanding the needs of women and reflecting on them? We have recently adopted a new policy on gender and humanitarian operations which is based on three main pillars.

The first pillar is mainstreaming – i.e. making sure that when we look at food or protection, or shelter needs, we keep an eye on what we need to do for women. You know when you visit a refugee camp, you would quickly become aware whether there is attention to gender, to women or not. You would be aware because of the way lighting is set, the way paths towards the bathroom and toilet facilities are set. You would be aware because you would be able to see that the majority of occupants are women and children and whether those places where primarily you have women and children enjoy the same level of supply as those where there are men. And you would know whether the job of the humanitarians assisting women is well done.

We are taking this issue of understanding the needs of women better very, very seriously, but we also know that mainstreaming gender in operations is not enough.

So, **the second pillar is targeting actions**, actions that are directly directed towards the needs of women. And they go from making sure that there are health facilities with women medical personnel that take care of the needs of women, to identifying specific funding that would give women the dignity of taking care of themselves, in other words voucher or cash programs which are directed to women.

A big part of our work is directed towards **capacity building**, and this is the **third pillar** of our new policy on gender and humanitarian operations - making sure that the partners we work with are aware of what works and what does not work to make humanitarian aid more sensitive to the needs of women. We do it throughout our own programs but I want to give you three examples of capacity building, of this direction to making partners more aware, that I am particularly proud of.

- One is in looking at women as victims of violence and understanding how we can make women open up themselves.

We are supporting a hospital in DRC, the Panzi hospital, maybe some of you have heard of it. This is a hospital that is run by Dr. Mukwege, a fantastic human being who decided that in DRC, where rape is a weapon of war, he is going to put himself on the line to help women. And actually that almost cost him his life, he and his family were attacked. In Panzi hospital women come with tragedies that are very hard to present. I remember when I walked in a room, seeing there a woman in terrible medical condition and then a little girl, 6 years old, and I thought this girl was the daughter of the woman that was a victim of violence. Then I learnt from Dr. Mukwege that the little girl was also a victim of rape herself, which is so unthinkable.

We fund this program, but what do we do for capacity building which is actually more important? We equipped Dr. Mukwege with the ability to recruit women who have been victims of violence to work in the hospital, help women like themselves to stand on their feet, regain their dignity and regain their lives. Very often these women are cast out by their own families. And yet, building this network of women who stand tall to defend themselves and to create a sense for other women, yes we can, yes we can say this is a capacity building of a kind that it's worth every cent of our taxpayers' money.

- A second example on how we promote women to be in charge of their destiny in horrible humanitarian situations and how we train our partners to do that is the expansion of cash and voucher programs instead of providing in-kind food.

In Europe we are proud of our decision, taken a few years ago, that we would no more ship our agricultural surpluses to poor countries as aid because when we do that we create a culture of dependency and we kill the local farmers. Instead, we would provide cash and vouchers. And more importantly, we would experiment by putting this in the hands of women.

I remember in 2011 in Niger, we visited a village where we gave the cash to women to buy whatever they think it is necessary – maybe food, maybe seeds, maybe something for their children. So the women met us, big smiles, they hold their vouchers, and the men were on the other side. I went to the men and I asked them "What did you think of us giving the cash to the women and not to you?" and one of them answered "Well, when you did it at the beginning I didn't like it. But if you gave me the money, I would have bought a bicycle and my people would have been very hungry". And that recognition that women have the ability to take care of themselves and their families coming from the men is something that I will remember forever.

And of course what we do is to build with our network of partners an expansion of programs that are humanitarian by purpose but also have development benefits; they keep dignity and lift up women of their communities.

- My third example is standing by our own example. I am going to ask now Florika Fink-Hooijer to stand up. Florika is the first woman director in the humanitarian aid service at the European Commission. I am the first Commissioner for humanitarian aid and it is not very difficult to guess my gender. I believe that it is very important that we take the issue of woman empowerment as matter of leadership through action. And that we need to see more and more women in the field, in these conference rooms. Not only talking, the talk is what I do, but also telling you "we want the world as well".

Thank you!