

EU & Sport and Gender Equality

10th EWS Women and Sport Conference London, 16 September 2011

Speech

Mme Chair, Baroness Campbell, dear participants,

First of all I would like to congratulate the organisers of this 10th Women and Sport Conference. I would also like to congratulate the Council of Europe for its initiative to focus the 3rd EPAS Annual conference on promoting diversity to women and sport and for pursuing this joint venture with the EWS, the European Women and Sport network.

We are back in the UK where it all started in Brighton in May 1994 and ready to address, with fresh vigour, the issues which have motivated this network from the start - to correct the imbalances that women face in their participation in sport, both as athletes and in sport governance.

Since 1994, the world of sport has changed, Europe has changed and the fight for equality between women and men carries on in all walks of life. On the specific issue of women's participation in sport, it is time now to move on to concrete actions.

The popularity of sport knows no boundaries. It transcends borders and continents, generations, cultural differences and of course also gender.

It has a unique ability to connect people and communities and to empower, motivate and inspire groups and individuals.

Sport is too important a part of our social fabric for women to be excluded from it; or for them to feel that it is not worth their participation. Women have come a long way in sport. From ancient times, where women had no access to the Olympic stadium until today, where sport is a career choice or otherwise part of everyday life of many women.

According to a Eurobarometer survey carried out in 2009, more women are now participating in sport throughout Europe than before. This is a very positive development since the first 1994 Brighton Conference. But there are still reasons for concern: in the most popular sporting age group 15 – 24, the differences in sport participation between men and women are remarkable 19% for men; only 8% among women.

We must keep working hard in promoting participation of women in sport, especially of women and girls living in more disadvantaged conditions who are the group where the participation gap is most pronounced.

We all know how crucial it is to promote the positive value of all kind of sport and physical activities like dance, swimming and cycling, especially at the age of 12 to 16 years when many girls typically stop participating and start to confine their interest to being spectators of male sports and fans of their stars.

But we are also fully aware of the barriers and thresholds within sport organisations and institutions still existing for some groups of women. A gender friendly climate should become one of the main characteristics of sport institutions in whatever sport.

Such a climate could be achieved by giving equal attention to girls and women in clubs; by educating the coaches; by providing a larger diversity of sport opportunities; and by actively fighting against discrimination and sexual harassment.

The opportunities for participation that I am calling for must go beyond the practice of sport. More women should be involved in managing sport clubs and in the governance of sporting organisations. The presence of women in leadership positions in the European sport movement is alarmingly low (20 of the 52 European sports federations do not have a single woman on their board and only two of them have a woman leader).

The situation with the international federations is not any better. The I.O.C. for example has a total of 141 members and only 16% of them are females.

The average percentage of women in the international sports federations is below 10% and 21 federations do not have any women on their board at all.

This is something that I observe directly in my frequent meetings with the sporting world. During my first visit to UEFA's headquarters and my meeting with their Executive Committee, I was about to address them using the usual expression "ladies and gentlemen", but, looking around, I realised that there were no ladies in the room! This is not acceptable and I told them so. I believe that we politicians have a responsibility to act.

The question of course is how! How do we implement the proposals and good intentions expressed in declarations, charters and conclusions of conferences? It is not an easy task to change working methods and assumptions which have underpinned the world of sport for generations.

Nor do I think that advocates of women's rights give the matter sufficient attention – my own observation is that sport gets only a low priority in gender discussions.

Nevertheless, based on positive developments in the field of sport and gender at European level I foresee more commitment and progress in the near future with the support of sport stakeholders and public institutions.

The new Treaty on the functioning of European Union made it possible to include the European dimension of sport in the EU agenda. It has taken time and the discussions were not easy, but finally the European Commission adopted its first Communication on developing sport in Europe this year.

The Communication presents the Commission's ideas for EU-level cooperation in sport for the coming years, always seeking out areas where the EU dimension can bring a real value-added.

We propose measures to enhance the societal, economic and organisational dimension of sport. Athletes, sport organisations and citizens will benefit from our actions.

The EU agenda for sport will be built on actions where the EU's added value will complement the actions of Member States and support the efforts of sporting organisations themselves. One of our commitments is to promote the access of women to leadership positions in sport. We propose a formal, ongoing, structured dialogue with the sport movement to be used as the first channel to focus in particular on women's role in sports governance.

Member States and the European Parliament have already expressed their positive attitude towards this priority. Under the Belgian presidency in 2010 the EU ministers of Sport recognised the role of sport as a source of and driver for active social inclusion and pointed out the need to encourage gender equality in sport, concerning both access to sport but also representation in decision-making bodies, and including active measures against gender stereotyping.

The issue has been taken up by two Committees of the European Parliament, the Culture Committee which covers sport and the Women's Rights and Gender Committee. They have made very concrete proposals, to include gender mainstreaming into all sports-related activities. The debate in the EP has not been finalised yet but the signals are clear and very supportive of the positive agenda being addressed here today.

I have also been in the position to direct a certain amount of EU funds to support pilot projects to promote women's leadership in sport. The projects started in January 2010 and were finalised in March 2011. The WILD project by ENGSO has offered training and counselling for women in national and international sport organisations to support their career progression towards positions of leadership.

In addition there was a breakthrough project conducted by the European Athletics Federation, aimed at raising awareness among national federations in athletics by discussing the issue of women's leadership - all CEO's of the participating national federations underwent specific training on women's leadership.

And I should not forget to mention, in this perspective, the Olympia project coordinated by the Italian Sport for All organisation - UISP. This project raised awareness of sport and gender issues at different festivals and other occasions, drawing media coverage to the challenges of women in sport and the position of women in national and international sport organisations. UISP drew up a new charter on women and sport, which was presented successfully in the European Parliament in May.

The experiences with these pilot projects have convinced me of the added value of European support to promote the exchange of best practices in this field and confirmed that we were right when we attached a high priority to the issue of women in leadership positions.

The results of these projects have been very positive. They establish a clear conclusion that training and mentoring are helpful in building up the competences of women candidates for leadership positions. However, I get the impression that actions such as these which focus on training women candidates will not of themselves be sufficient to break through the glass ceiling which still exists in many sport governing bodies. Therefore a discussion on other tools and instruments is needed, to tackle also the fight against gender stereotypes in sport and the media coverage of women in sport.

Only then will the institutional forms of discrimination, step by step, disappear and governance in sport will be significantly improved.

I am optimistic that these steps could be made. One of the reasons for my positive expectations is the decision of the European Commission to propose the next Multiannual Financial Framework of the EU for the period 2014 – 2020. It includes for the first time a budget for sport, a Sport sub-programme linked to our major Education programme.

Details about this programme are still being worked out and will be made public at the end of this year but I can inform you already that the capacity of sport to strengthen social inclusion (and part of this, gender equality) will be one of the priorities.

Such a sub-programme on sport will make it possible to concretely support the good ideas and actions of the sport movement and particularly grassroots sport organisations.

And there are more advantages of having a dedicated funding for sport as regards the past pilot projects:

- Support for a sub-programme will be guaranteed for at least 7 years.
- Support could be organized for multiannual projects which is beneficial for the sustainability of the results.
- Depending on the arrangements made, countries in Europe which are not members of the European Union, could be project leaders.
- And finally the cooperation with the Council of Europe could be made more concrete so that both organisations act in full complementarity to each other in their activities. The coming two years will be crucial to define how this will be worked out.

The last reason for my optimism about the future is based on the growing recognition of sport as part of a larger and coherent EU strategy on equality between women and men. The EU is rightly proud of the way in which, from its earliest days, support for women's legal rights and their equal opportunities has been a core policy.

The new EU gender strategy adopted in 2010 pays, for the first time particular attention to sport. It draws attention to the potential role of sport in the fight against gender stereotyping and makes reference to the new sport funding streams that I have described in the list of actions. I think this recognition is very important. The EU is committed both to promoting equality of opportunity within sport; and to using sport as a tool in the ongoing, broader fight for equal opportunities.

Very interesting in this perspective is the way that my colleague, Commissioner Reding, has challenged the business leaders in Europe to increase women's presence on corporate boards with "Women on the board Pledge for Europe". In March 2011 she challenged publicly listed companies in Europe to sign the pledge by March 2012.

This pledge involves a voluntary commitment to increase women's presence on corporate boards to 30% by 2015 and to 40% by 2020. Companies should indicate concrete steps they are taking to increase the number of women in top positions and the planning to put in place the measures this year.

The question of course is how this initiative will work out and more specifically how it will work out in European sport. I have already raised, informally, in my meetings with members of executive boards of IOC and UEFA, the idea that the pledge could be taken up in their governance structures. This is something I intend to return to, I can assure you of that!

The idea of such a pledge would in my view complement the warmly welcomed initiative of the Sydney Scoreboard of the International working group for women and sport. Probably it is a good idea that EWS and the international Working group for women and sport could advise me on this matter in the near future.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

In a pre-Olympic year you always feel the excitement growing in the world of sport, and especially in the host country. Athletes, coaches, organizers start to count down the days. All sporting eyes are focused on London 2012.

My own hope is that it can be a great and memorable Olympic Games and that it can be a breakthrough games for the participation, excellence and visibility of our women athletes. And that this in turn will build a lasting legacy in the form of increased participation by women in sports, both as competitors and decision makers.

I wish you an inspiring and fruitful conference!