



Government
Equalities Office

Putting equality at the heart of government

Rt. Hon Harriet Harman QC MP

**Minister for Women and Equality
and Leader of the House of Commons**

**‘Women; a new dimension in international relations:
A new European network of women ministers and parliamentarians and building
support for the new UN women’s agency’.**

“European Summit of Women in Power”

Cadiz

Wednesday 3rd February 2010

Co-hosted by the Spanish Presidency of the EU and the UK

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This meeting in Cadiz of women ministers from across Europe gives us an important opportunity at a crucial time.

We are 25 women ministers from 17 European countries and not just equality ministers but ministers with a range of portfolios. This is the first time that there has ever been such a meeting since Athens in 1992 when there were 5 ministers and 3 parliamentarians. It is typical of Bibiana's passion and commitment and the Spanish presidency that they have seized this opportunity and I am very grateful to you for bringing us together.

We all believe that equality for women is important

- As a matter of individual human rights
- For a successful dynamic economy
- And is necessary for tackling family poverty

I think we all believe that we want to play our part in helping women in our own countries improve their lives – and we also believe that as women in Europe we want to work to support women across Europe and in the rest of the world, including developing countries.

We work in our own countries. We are here because we want to work together in Europe and we want to work together internationally.

We have made great strides forward in terms of women's representation in political life – in parliaments and in governments. There is now only one country in Europe which has an all male

cabinet team. That is a big change from when I was first in parliament. I was one of only 3% women MPs and there was an all male cabinet. There were many countries that were in the same position. But though we have made progress we are still pioneers. We are still trying to break new ground. We are still in a minority.

To deliver for women in our own countries we need to be stronger. We are stronger when we all work together. I draw strength from knowing that Bibiana and Nyamko are fighting the same battles that I am. So working together we can share ideas, learn lessons from each other, support each other.

But also we can change the way countries work together. Hitherto, countries working together has been the responsibility of men. Men leaders, men finance ministers, men foreign secretaries. There was no alternative – as there were only men in Government then. But now in every continent and in every country there is a chance to make progress on supporting women by women working together internationally.

I believe we must move from a position where women meet ad hoc – to where the collaboration of women ministers across Europe is entrenched. That meetings such as this happen every year. There are new ministers each year, there are new issues to tackle each year. We need to sustain momentum to take work forward – not start afresh with each presidency.

Women ministers meeting is an important new dimension of the relations between countries. Baroness Ashton is strongly committed to this agenda and will work with us

I think this is important not just for women ministers in Europe but also for women ministers around the world. There are now women in leading roles in every continent and in most countries and that is a trend which is only set to continue. This offers the prospect that the agenda for women – equality, tackling poverty, ending violence against women, women’s representation, all the issues set out in the The Beijing Platform for Action and in the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women – this agenda can move beyond an issue where the NGO’s make demands of male dominated international structures. And then find themselves disappointed about the response to their demands. Now, women in parliaments, in government, can themselves work together. Not just to ask for change but to make the change. And to back up women in developing countries. Hitherto there has been a fragmentation of women’s issues in the UN. No fewer than 4 separate organisations. This was recognised in the important resolution passed by the UN on 14th September last year to create a single UN women’s agency. I’m delighted that Ines Alberdi, Executive Director of UNIFEM, is with us today.

As women ministers in Europe I hope we will all strongly back the formation of this new agency, which will be headed by an Under Secretary General. We must keep the momentum of the September 14th resolution. We must ensure that the agency has

women in its leadership and that it also brings together on a standing basis – not ad hoc – women in leading positions in government and parliament around the world. Again there have been meetings of women leaders and ministers - but they have been ad hoc.

The most important thing is women's representation and for the new UN women's agency to back up women representatives. This is the only way delivering for women is going to be sustainable and legitimate. Who will fight hardest for the maternal health care of the woman in the village of Northern Nigeria? The woman in the Nigerian state legislature. Who will fight hardest for the chance for women in the highlands of Tanzania to get a loan to set up her own small business? The woman in the Tanzanian parliament. The importance of the new UN agency will be that the woman in the Nigerian state legislature or the Tanzanian parliament will know that they have the full support and backing of women leaders around the world. They are pioneers but they are not struggling on their own. It is in that spirit that you, Bibiana, under the auspices of the Spanish Presidency, have called together the meeting later next month with women from Africa.

I am calling together in London later this month the most senior women from all the Embassies in London. So far we have 24 attending. I want to win their support for this agenda. Later this month I am bringing together the NGO's to work with them to build support and involvement. Then we will meet at the UN next month in the meeting on the Commission on the Status of Women.

I hope that we can continue to work together. Together we can make more progress than we can alone. For women in our own countries, for women across Europe and for women who have furthest to go to achieve financial security and equality – women in the developing world.

So I hope we can have an effective UN women's agency, a powerful network of women ministers and parliamentarians under the auspices of the UN, matched by a powerful network of women ministers and parliamentarians as a standing feature of the EU.