

Welcome speech by  
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President of EWLA

London 4 July 2008

Distinguished Representatives of European Institutions,  
Presidents of National Women Lawyers Associations,  
Dear Colleagues

It is a great honour and pleasure to wish you all welcome to the 8<sup>th</sup> congress of EWLA in London. We have participants from approximately 20 countries.

It is high time we hold a congress in London since British women lawyers had a very active role in the establishment of EWLA in 2000, in addition to German and Austrian women lawyers.

This congress will handle issues concerning different aspects of gender equality, and as our congress theme indicates, women lawyers wish to be heard when the future of Europe is being planned.

Gender violence and trafficking in women and children continue to be a serious problem world-wide. Europe makes no exception. This year our congress has no workshops dedicated to these crucial themes, unlike many of our previous congresses. This does not mean that we have forgotten these themes at this year's event. On the contrary. Our key-note speaker will be Deputy Secretary General Maud de Boer-Buquicchio from the Council of Europe. Knowing the active role of the Council of Europe and the Deputy Secretary General in combating gender violence and trafficking we can rest assured that these issues will be covered in the plenary session today.

We are very pleased with the active approach of the EU to promote gender equality. In the plenary panel session we will be honoured to hear the news and views of the European Parliament and the European Commission on gender equality. I hope they will be good news.

Both the European Commission and EWLA have an active role in promoting women in decision-making positions. We were very honored and pleased to be included in the Commission's new network of women in decision-making. We will of course do our best to contribute to the success of this network that had its first meeting a month ago.

EWLA will continue its activities in the field of promoting women in decision-making positions, both on the European and national level. I am very pleased to invite you all to our conference on corporate governance, including the theme of promoting women on company boards, to be held at the EcoSoc in Brussels on 10 November. Programs are distributed here and I hope to see many of you at the event.

We also cooperate with and support national Women Lawyers Associations in their efforts in promoting women in decision-making positions. The past year saw some interesting women lawyers' activities.

It is often said that there are so few women in top positions because women don't want to be directors. This was proven wrong at least among women lawyers when we launched the director training program for women lawyers in Finland. We had so many applicants to the program that many interested colleagues' applications could not be accepted as space was limited. Forty women lawyers have now finished the year-long program including 20 evening seminars. I hope this program could be used as inspiration in other countries to promote women lawyers in their careers. In Germany, women lawyers have held a major event to draw attention to the fact that there are very few women members on company boards although capable women are available. EWLA is prepared to cooperate with other national Women Lawyers Associations also to produce more projects on the national level to promote women in decision-making positions.

We are seeing some development in the field of gender equality at work but not enough. The pay-gap remains a problem in all EU member states. Very few women make it to the top. This is contrary to benefit of Europe. We have ample scientific evidence that companies are more profitable if they more women directors than average companies. Women's participation in the board of companies is not only an issue of equality but a question of Europe's success. Europe cannot afford to lose women's full contribution. This issue will be covered in our workshop on leadership in business and public life.

The costs of parental leaves to women's employers' continue to be a major obstacle for women's position in working life. Europe should focus its attention to the Icelandic model. In Iceland, all men have an individual right to a three months' paternity leave with benefits paid to the father during the absence from work. Most Icelandic fathers use their right. This certainly benefits the fathers and children in many ways. But the most interesting result is that the birth rate in Iceland is the highest in Europe after Ireland. In general, Europe suffers from a very low birth rate, not

least in Southern European countries. If we want to change this, paternity leaves must be promoted. The European Union should have a role in this.

Despite existing European and national legislation on gender equality at work, further measures should be taken. One important concrete tool in promoting equality at work is gender equality planning. This is mandatory in the Nordic countries but is unfortunately still missing from EU legislation.

If equality plans are made satisfactorily, they are based on the equality situation of the individual work place and tailored to include appropriate measures to combat the specific problems at the work place. These measures can also include the promotion of fathers to keep paternity leaves.

One of the reasons for the importance of paternity leaves is that working women still carry double burden in all of Europe. This causes problems not just for the careers of women but also for families. A recent study in Finland showed that divorce rate is lower in families where the father has taken a proper parental leave compared to families where the father only perhaps took a short paternity leave at the time of the baby's birth.

Next year we will see elections for the European Parliament. Let's hope that the number of women MP's will increase considerably. I also hope that we will not be disappointed when we see the composition of the new Commission.

Today we have plenty of women experts in all areas. The question remains why these women are not visible in different organs and events. EU should contribute to making women visible in all possible ways. This includes memberships in advisory organs and other bodies. When different parties are invited to submit nominations for different organs, they should be invited to submit both female and male candidates. This is common practice for state-run organs in some member states and has led to balanced participation of women in these organs. Why isn't it so in the EU? Why do we still see press releases of selection for members to EU organs consisting of almost only men when in fact more capable women have been available?

I have mentioned some of the themes that EWLA is interested in. These and many other issues will be handled in our plenary sessions and workshops today and tomorrow.

It is a tremendous effort to organize an international congress on a voluntary basis. On behalf of EWLA I wish to offer our deepest gratitude to all of those who made this event possible, including our speakers, sponsors and congress organizers, especially our UK board member and Secretary General Judith Willis.

I am confident that our efforts will produce a successful congress. I expect a lively discussion – as always at EWLA congresses. Networking among colleagues is also an essential part of our congresses. At the end of the congress the General Assembly of EWLA will be held. As always, we intend to give resolutions on important subjects.

I wish you all interesting two days in London!