

Brussels, 22 July 1980.

Speech delivered by Mr. Vredeling to the United Nations  
Conference on the Decade for Women, Copenhagen,

22 July 1980

Madam Chairman, Ladies, Gentlemen,

I should like to begin, Madam Chairman, by congratulating you on your election as Chairman of this meeting and conveying the best wishes of the Commission of the European Communities for the success of this Conference which marks an important stage in the United Nations Decade for Women.

I should like to take the opportunity while I am speaking here today to draw the Conference's attention to some of the initiatives to encourage equality between men and women taken by the European Community, acting as a Community, over the last few years and more especially since 1974, shortly before your "Decade for Women" began.

These Community initiatives have related in particular to working women. You are well aware, Ladies and Gentlemen, that discrimination against working women mainly operates via legislation and practical circumstances without forgetting of course that such discrimination originates in peoples' attitudes.

The Commission of the European Communities began by drawing up a legislative framework aimed at eliminating discrimination with regard to employment. The main objective of this legislation is to achieve equality as regards pay, access to employment, training and promotion, working conditions and social security. As a result, the legislation follows almost exactly the objectives of the United Nations, as set out under the heading of "employment" which you are dealing with at this Conference.

As regards the elimination of the kind of discrimination which operates via practical circumstances we began by introducing measures to improve and change the education of young people with a view to improving the balance between the education of girls and boys and we also helped youth bodies organizing this kind of activity. Finally, we launched a number of pilot schemes in this area.

The European Social Fund, a major financial instrument of the Commission, which is basically intended to provide support for vocational training and retraining, has made a special contribution to the vocational training of young women. But I should like to draw attention to one particular measure organized by the Social Fund which gives financial aid towards the organization of training measures intended to help women, who have had to leave work for a certain period of time, to re-establish themselves in employment. In addition, the Commission also organizes seminars and conferences, for example, the conference which we organized in Manchester in May to bring together representatives of the national organizations working to further women's equality. This conference made possible an exchange of opinions on measures to be undertaken in the immediate future. It showed that the problems are concentrated mainly in the segregation of men and women on the labour market, in the area of family responsibilities which tend to devolve on women alone, and in technological progress which threatens to have disastrous results for women's employment. It was also discovered that at the present time tax and social security legislation in the European Communities are often such as to discourage women from working. I do not intend to go into detail on these discussions, but I should like to point out to you that in my view the present situation is far from satisfactory, even though a considerable degree of progress has been made.

But quite apart from measures undertaken in the area of legislation and practical circumstances, we must realize that there is still a great deal of work to do in the area of persuading people and changing their attitudes.

In all our societies there is a deeply rooted prejudice against women who stay at home and have never gone out to work. And it is precisely the value of meetings such as the present one that they provide an opportunity to show up such prejudices, to describe and compare experiences and to define positions in relation to the world community in such a way as to eliminate this discrimination which still exists and which will perhaps exist to an ever-increasing degree in a world faced with economic problems and unemployment, where in the view of some people employment should be reserved for men.

In this area we need to work together as an international community. This means of course, beginning our efforts by appealing directly to the new generation and in particular encouraging girls to take a new approach when choosing a job. Boys should be educated to a point where they are more prepared to share equally in household tasks. This is included in a programme drawn up by the Commission which is at present before the Council of Ministers. Adults are catered for by a proposal for a programme of continuous education.

This is also a good time for taking stock of measures undertaken so far, seeing to what extent the desired results have been achieved and evaluating what remains to be done to achieve them. As regards Community legislation, in 1979 a report from the Commission to the Council was drawn up concerning equal pay in the Member States. During the current year the Commission will report on the legislative measures introduced in the area of equal access to employment, training and promotion and as regards working conditions. On the basis of information in its possession, the Commission is at present

examining the possibility of further legal instruments in the area of maternal and paternal leave and in those areas of social security not yet covered by the existing instruments. All this information is of course available to the assembly.

I am glad to be able to announce that we're preparing a new European Equality Commission to assist the Commission, at Community level, to enable national Equal Opportunity Commissions to discuss and to make their distinctive contribution to the formulation and implementation of new Community initiatives.

I am pleased to note the degree of interest shown in the situation of migrant women. With more than 3.5 million of them living in the Community, it was inevitable that the Commission should concern itself with the problems of this group. Aside from the disadvantages under which women in general continue to labour, migrant women also suffer from the fact that they are strangers in the society where they live, constituting one of the most underprivileged and isolated classes. The Commission is conscious of the need to combat these problems and has therefore launched a study aimed at identifying, within the framework of an overall approach to the phenomenon of labour migration within contemporary society, solutions to the specific problems of women. It thus hopes to be able to devise a policy which will help to improve the lot of this group, whose position in our society is marginal in the extreme.

After this survey of Community activities to strengthen the position of women in society, I should not like to finish without drawing attention to how the European Parliament is involving itself in this area with increasing zeal and effectiveness. Proof of this is the fact that two members of the Parliament form part of the Commission Delegation to this Conference.

Very soon after the first meeting of the European Parliament, which was elected directly for the first time last year, it set up from among its members an ad hoc committee specially concerned with matters concerning women.

By coincidence the preparations for the Copenhagen Conference which we are now attending was one of the factors which provided the impetus for the establishment of this committee. As the committee has progressed however, its concept of its task has broadened considerably. It is at present engaged in producing a wide-ranging analysis of women's position in society in the European Community and the world which promises to be very important for the development of future European policy on behalf of women.

The problem with which we are concerned here, is a problem of enormous dimensions, Madam Chairman. If we exaggerate a little - but not very much - we can sum up the situation by saying that one half of the world is discriminating against the other half. One of the tasks of the United Nations and of the European Commission is to play a part in ensuring that this discrimination ceases to exist.