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OF THE

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S YEAR

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Summary of speaking notes of Dr. P.J. HILLERY,  
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European Communities

The designation of 1975 as International Women's Year by the United Nations has attracted the attention of the whole world to the problems faced by women, to women's rights and to the important contribution of women to the economic, social and cultural life of our society.

It is a great honour for me to be present at this Conference to speak to you about the situation of women in the European Community.

Their problem, as elsewhere in the world, is obtaining real equality of treatment with their male colleagues. I should like to explain at the outset that the competence of the Community institutions is limited to women and employment - the conditions of work of the some 35 million who make up one-third of the Community's work force and the opening up of employment opportunities to those women not yet part of work force of the Community who wish to enter employment.

Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome provides for equal pay for men and women for equal work. Despite this long-standing provision and a subsequent Recommendation adopted by the member States, the principle of equal pay was not fully translated into practice in all our member States. It was necessary, therefore, to reinforce action in this field by a Directive which was adopted by the Council last December; the Directive obliges the member States to implement the principle of equal pay in their national legislations by the end of this year, including a provision giving women the right to enforce their rights at law.

Important as it is to eliminate discrimination in pay, this is, of course, only one aspect of the more general problem of discrimination with which women are faced in the field of employment.

The Commission has studied the matter through special surveys carried out initially in the six-member Community and subsequently extended to the three new member States.

The Reports clearly revealed the following trends:

- a relatively low level of general education particularly in older women;
- insufficient - if not totally non-existent - vocational training;
- where training and education was adequate, a lack of suitable employment (e.g. university graduates working in minor clerical jobs);
- the very small proportion of women in managerial staff;
- the difficulty of reconciling work with family responsibilities as a result of the lack of child-care facilities.

On the basis of these Reports the Commission presented a programme of actions to be carried out to improve this situation, as well as a second draft Directive. The purpose of this Directive is the abolition of all forms of discrimination against women in access to employment, and promotion, in vocational training and working conditions. The draft is at present being examined by the Council of Ministers and is expected to be adopted in the coming months.

The call for equality of treatment for women is gaining ground at a time when many countries are undergoing considerable economic difficulties and serious unemployment. We must, however, be on our guard against any suggestion that justice and equity are to prevail only in times of plenty.

The adoption of the new draft Directive on equality of treatment will not end the story of according to women the place they deserve in our society.

Traditional attitudes and prejudices will need to be broken down. This is why so much stress needs to be put on improving information; to make women more aware of their rights; to promote solidarity among women; and to convince society as a whole how much it stands to benefit from the wealth of talent which it has up to now largely neglected.

We in the Commission have plans to step-up our information programme and to encourage the greater use of the European Social Fund for pilot experiments geared to showing what can be done by way of extending the range of employment possibilities for women.

Working women frequently have a double role: they look after the family in addition to the responsibilities of the job. Although we have no mandate to deal with family policy as such, the whole basis of the Community's policy is to reconcile family responsibilities with job aspirations. This requires social infrastructures as well as the acceptance that maternity is a contribution to society for which society should provide; not just leaving it to the individual women concerned to make do as best they can. Parents should have the choice between pursuing a career; or staying at home to look after the children; or combining the two.

The "twentieth century revolution", in terms of the fundamental changes in Society must be based on establishing the place of women and their rôle. Greater participation in economic, political and social life, and in decision-making at all levels can only improve our society in the direction of humanisation and peace. I believe that we should all work for a new world based on the sharing of responsibilities and opportunities between men and women.