**Promoting gender equality and the role of the father in the family – the Bulgarian experience**

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Gender equality is an important prerequisite for the full realization of human rights. Bulgaria has long traditions in the promotion of gender equality and is constantly upgrading the national legislation with the aim to integrate a gender perspective in all policies, strategies and programmes.

The necessary legislative measures are taken to ensure the full advancement of women and to guarantee them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with men.

Equality before the law is a fundamental principle enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria. Women and men in Bulgaria enjoy equal civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

Gender-based discrimination is prohibited by law. All relevant legislation and government policies contain anti-discriminatory regulations. There are no spheres of activity reserved only for women or for men.

The Bulgarian Government has developed a National Strategy for the Promotion of Gender Equality which is implemented by all institutions through the elaboration of annual Plans of Action.

Among the main priorities of Bulgaria’s human rights agenda is the protection and promotion of the rights of women and girls, the right to education, the empowerment of women and the elimination of all forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls.

In its 2012 Report on “Women in Economic Decision Making in the EU” the Directorate-General for Justice of the European Commission gives Bulgaria as an example together with some other EU Member States of how the government encourages national listed companies to make more efforts to increase women’s representation on their boards.

For the period 2010 – 2012 Bulgaria ranks third in the EU in terms of women’s participation in the executive boards of large companies with a growth of more than 4%.

The Bulgarian government takes special measures to create the necessary conditions for women to successfully combine professional and family life which is directly linked to women’s workload and their position on the labour market, as well as their income and economic independence. The main challenge is to encourage men to assume more responsibilities in the family, including through special incentives for men to take paternity leave.

In 2009 an amendment was made to the Bulgarian Labor Code that created the provision of paternity leave. The father now has the right to a 15-day leave after the birth of his child and in addition, he can also utilize the second half of the 410 days maternity leave instead of the mother. The first 200 days of the maternity leave can be used only by the mother.

This measure is extremely important for achieving balance between the professional development and the family responsibilities for both women and men. Data show that an increasing number of men utilize the 15-day leave after the birth of their child while still very few men take advantage of the right to paternity leave.

In the last 20 years the role of Bulgarian women in the political life has steadily increased and I would like to share some positive examples.

For two terms already women hold the office of President of the National Assembly and Mayor of Sofia. Since Bulgaria’s accession to the EU in 2007, the European Commissioner from Bulgaria has always been a woman. It is a great honour for us also that the Director-General of UNESCO is a Bulgarian woman.

In the last 20 years the number of female Members of Parliament in the National Assembly has increased more than twice. In the current 43rd National Assembly there are 48 female MPs and 5 of the two-22 Standing Committees are headed by women. 5 out of the 17 members from the Republic of Bulgaria in the European Parliament are women.

Since the middle of the 90s women have held a number of high-level government offices, namely: Vice President (1992-1993 and at present); Prime Minister (1994-1995); Deputy Prime Minister in several governments; Ministers, Heads of State Agencies, etc. The prevailing majority of civil servants in the central and local administration are women.

In the current Government 2 of the Deputy Prime Ministers and 5 of the Ministers are women – namely the Ministers of Energy, of Tourism, of Regional Development, and of Environment and Waters. For the first time a woman holds the office of Minister of Home Affairs.

Bulgarian women are well represented also in the management and administration of the local authorities – more than 30 per cent of the municipal counselors are women. Three of the mayors of big Bulgarian cities, including of the capital city, are women.

Two thirds of the magistrates in the national courts at all levels are women. 43 per cent of the magistrates in the Prosecutor’s Office of Bulgaria are women, and since 2009 one of the Deputy Prosecutors is a woman. One third of the judges in the Constitutional Court are women.

The prevailing majority of the Managing Directors of Non-governmental Organizations in Bulgaria are women.

There are many more positive examples of women’s participation in decision-making processes in Bulgaria which prove the strong commitment of the Bulgarian authorities to achieving full equality between women and men in all areas of political and public life through promoting the empowerment of women and the protection of their human rights.

**Thank you for your attention!**

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