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Equal opportunity policies and institutions of the British Government

01 Apr 2010

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Ambassador Dorey, who was one of the speakers of the conference, delivered a speech by the title of "Equal opportunity policies and institutions of the British Government", in which he summarised the actions of the past decades taken by the British Government to tackle gender inequality.

During the event, the "Best Workplace for Women 2009" prizes were also handed out, in which, the British MARKS & SPENCER Hungarian franchise partner, S Modell Kereskedelmi Zrt. received the first prize amongst Hungarian company's employing 30-250 workers.

HMA Greg Dorey's speech

Tisztelt Ferenczi Andrea elnök asszony, kedves vendégek!

I am delighted to be here at today's event, arranged by the Association for Women's Career Development in Hungary (Magyar Női Karrierfejlesztési Szövetség MNKSZ) - an organisation whose work I admire and which I am very happy to support. I am also pleased that for very many years there has been a long-standing and collaborative friendship between you, Madam President, and the British Embassy in Budapest. We look forward to continuing this.

The MNKSZ fulfils a critical role in Hungary. It has a clear and indeed noble mission to improve the position of women in society. This is a task to which we all, in Hungary and elsewhere, need to subscribe and which we should work hard to realise.

I was invited to this prestigious event to talk about equal opportunity policies and institutions in the UK. These are matters about which my country's Government feels strongly and cares deeply. Discrimination in these areas has of course not been eradicated from the UK. Indeed not that long ago discriminatory attitudes were widespread. But in the past few decades successive Governments have robustly dealt with

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these, with some success.

Acts:

The statutory framework for addressing gender equality in the different administrations, by which I here mean England, Scotland and Wales (because separate arrangements apply in Northern Ireland), can be found in the so-called Sex Discrimination Act, passed in 1975. It prohibits discrimination on the grounds of gender in employment and vocational training, the provision of goods, facilities and services, the exercise of public functions, education and premises.

In 2006 The Equality Act amended the Sex Discrimination Act to introduce the Gender Equality Duty. According to this, public bodies - when carrying out their functions – must have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination and harassment on the grounds of gender and to promote equality of opportunity between women and men. It represented the biggest change in gender equality legislation in the UK for 30 years. And for the first time is placed the onus on public bodies to be proactive in eliminating inequalities between women and men rather than relying on individuals to take action after discrimination has occurred.

The Gender Equality Duty requires listed public bodies to prepare and publish a Gender Equality Scheme, setting out how individual bodies will mainstream gender equality issues in areas such as policy-making, service provision, employment matters, statutory discretion and decision-making. The scheme will be reviewed and revised at least triennially. Listed public bodies must also assess the impact of their policies and practices on equality between women and men, to ensure that equality is considered as intrinsic and incorporated into all actions, programmes and policies from the outset, and to report annually on actions taken under the Gender Equality Duty.

And we are already building on that. The so-called Equality Bill, which has just completed its passage through the House of Lords, contains a number of further specific measures to tackle gender inequality. For example, under the Bill all public bodies with 150 or more staff will be required to publish their gender pay gap. For the private and voluntary sectors, the Bill requires employers with at least 250 staff to publish details of their gender pay gap. The Bill also bans pay secrecy clauses which conceal pay inequality between co-workers.

The Equality Bill will tackle as well under-representation of women in public life, for example by extending the time available to political parties to use all-women shortlists to 2030, and increasing the options open to political parties and public bodies to tackle under-representation. This is in recognition of the need to accelerate progress. The Bill will increase transparency about the diversity of political candidates by requiring political parties to publish diversity data on parliamentary candidate selections to help identify any barriers causing or contributing to under-representation of particular groups, such as women or disabled people.

The broader positive action provisions in the Equality Bill will enable faster progress in tackling under-representation of women on boards and in public appointments. All administrations continue to work closely with their respective Offices of the Commissioners for Public Appointments, in particular with regard to equal opportunities and diversity.

Institutions

But it is not just through legislation that the United Kingdom intends to fight for justice and fairness. It is also critically

important that we should have strong and well-founded institutional mechanisms to promote gender equality.

The UK's national response to the empowerment of women is led by the Minister and Deputy Minister for Women and Equality, who have a specific role to raise awareness across Government of the necessity, and the benefits, of addressing gender inequalities.

The Ministers sit on a broad range of Cabinet Committees covering areas such as public health, children, ageing, asylum and migration / and violence against women to make sure that the needs and interests of women are fully taken into account in a strategic way when national policies and programmes of action are being developed. The Ministers also participate in and/or chairs key inter-Ministerial groups dealing with policy on gender equality issues, including domestic and sexual violence, and on reducing numbers of women criminal offenders. In July 2007 the Minister for Women and Equality set out three priority areas for action (for England and Wales), namely:

1. to support women and families who are caring for children, elderly and disabled relatives;
2. to tackle violence against women, and to change the way women offenders are treated;
3. and to increase the representation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic women in public life.

The Minister for Women and Equality is supported by the Government Equalities Office (GEO), a self-standing Department responsible for the Government's overall strategy on equality as well as for promoting women's issues across Government. Since mid 2007, the GEO leads on mainstreaming gender equality policy across Government and promotes gender equality within wider UK society. It also takes the lead on co-ordinating joint work and cooperation between Scotland on gender equality and related issues. The GEO is responsible for delivering the priorities of the Minister for Women and Equality and leads on and supports the fulfilment of the UK's gender equality obligations internationally.

The UK Parliament also plays an important role in taking forward the gender equality agenda. For example, the all-party Associate Parliamentary Group for Sex Equality campaigns for the achievement of gender equality in the UK. And both Houses of Parliament host an annual debate marking International Women's Day. In 2009, the debate focused on the impact of the economic downturn on women.

NGOs

The Government recognises that success means involving wider society in this work. They have therefore established strong partnerships with non-governmental organisations to take forward the gender equality agenda. In particular, the Women's National Commission (WNC), an official but independent and umbrella advisory body that is fully funded by government and is respected as an unbiased commentator on Government policy, plays a key role. The WNC serves as a key interlocutor by sharing the views of its vast network of women's non-government organisations, throughout the UK, with the Government.

International work

The United Kingdom sees it as an important element of foreign policy to fight against inequality not just within but also outside of its borders. The UK Government therefore takes every opportunity to promote and actively participate in international fora on women's rights, including through relevant United

Nations (UN) and European Union mechanisms. To this end, the UK has been one of the main supporters of key relevant UN resolutions such as the Resolution on eliminating all forms of violence against women and takes part in annual meetings of the Commission on the Status of Women, the main inter-governmental forum for women's rights. In addition, the UK has been effective in utilising its role as a member of the UN Security Council to champion women's rights, for example through its recent work in support of UN Security Council Resolution 1820 to end sexual violence in armed conflict.

Results

So. What has all this achieved? As you can see, there has been a significant number of decisions made and institutions established in order to support gender equality in the United Kingdom. As a result, over the last 25 years, the number of women in employment in the UK has increased by over a third to 13.5 million. And there are more opportunities for women (and men) to balance work and family life thanks to family-friendly employment policies including in the areas of flexible working; increased availability of high quality child care; and related child and working tax credits and child benefits (covering up to 80 per cent of childcare costs for low income families).

There is now a much higher number of women in the UK represented in both public and political life, including in national and local government. In 2002, the Government introduced the UK-wide Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act, enabling political parties to take special measures to boost the number of women standing in local, national and European elections. The use of women-only shortlists, while controversial, has been one of the most effective mechanisms in increasing the representation of women in Parliament, with women currently making up nearly 20% of MPs compared to just 9% before 1997. In Northern Ireland, in 2009 women comprised 15% of the Assembly and 32% of public appointments (22% of Chair appointments) to public bodies. In Scotland women make up almost 35% of MSPs and 35% of those serving on public bodies. There are nearly 47% of women members in the Welsh Assembly.

Women are also benefiting from better preventative health care, including early breast cancer detection, intervention and treatment. Survival rates for breast cancer are improving. Thirty years ago, the five year survival rate for breast cancer was around 50%. Today, it is around 80%. The government has increased its investment in sexual health provision resulting in improved access to information and services for women and girls backed by a national campaign.

Aims for the future

But there is still much to be done. The number of female MPs etc is still too low, there is still a notable gender pay gap (especially in the private sector) and the heinously small number of women who reach senior management positions – these are all signs that inequality still exists. And it is not just a question of justice and fairness. The business case for ensuring that women play a full role in our economy and society is overwhelmingly strong.

The United Kingdom is committed and determined to continue to push for complete gender equality. In June 2009 the UK Government launched cross-Government targets on gender, ethnicity and disability for new public appointments made. The new cross-Government targets announced in June 2009 mean that by March 2011, women should make up 50%; disabled people should make up 14%; and people from an ethnic

minority background should make up 11% of new appointments to a wide range of UK public bodies. These targets are underpinned by a cross-Government Action Plan "Opening Doors – Increasing Diversity", designed to raise awareness of the public appointments system; provide support to potential applicants; and tackle the barriers that people face when applying for these roles.

The British Embassy in Budapest

Finally, as Ambassador of the United Kingdom, it is particularly important to me that at my Embassy everyone is treated equally. Every applicant who applies for an advertised job receives the same consideration regardless of matters such as gender or background – and we welcome applications from all under-represented groups including those with disabilities. At present the Embassy employs considerably more females than males and in a wide variety of functions, including within senior management. We all – myself included - make every effort to follow a flexible and family friendly approach to our jobs.

Thank you for letting me take part in this conference. May I wish the very best of luck to the MNKSZ for its future work: I look forward to hearing about your continuing successes.

Thank you very much for your kind attention!

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