

**“Gender Equality – Progress and Challenges from an
Interregional EU-ASEAN Perspective:
promoting young people exchange and gender equality”**

7 August 2016

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to be with you today to underline the importance of young people exchanges between ASEAN countries and the EU, and of promoting gender equality in our two regions.

Over the last five years, I have had the opportunity to be posted in Vietnam and the Philippines, two ASEAN member states and I am always struck by the dynamism of their economies which is linked to demographic growth. ASEAN's young middle class is expected to rise from 24% in 2010 to 65% of ASEAN's total population by 2030. As EU, we need to anticipate and seize the opportunities offered by this major demographic and economic change in the ASEAN region.

In a country like the Philippines, the average age is 23 years old, whereas in the European Union, the average age is 42 years old. This age difference obviously has an impact on the way that societies think about their future.

The importance of people-to-people exchanges, especially young people between the EU and ASEAN was recognized by the EU in May last year in a milestone document called "the EU and ASEAN: a strategic partnership with a purpose." This Joint Communication reflects a common approach between the European Commission and the European External Action Service regarding our priorities for the coming years.

In this Joint Communication, closer people-to-people contacts are considered a core component of a deeper EU-ASEAN partnership. They cover both dialogue and cooperation on research and innovation, and exchanges of higher education students and researchers.

Just to give you an example, more than 4000 students from ASEAN countries travel to Europe every year with some kind of European funding. This figure includes 250 ASEAN students who receive scholarships under the EU Erasmus Mundus programme, and students who benefit from scholarships which are provided by EU Member States.

The European Union is currently developing several initiatives in the educational area that benefit young people in the ASEAN region. This includes:

1/ Organising higher education fairs and academic exchanges throughout the ASEAN region.

2/ Sharing EU experience on modernisation and internationalisation of higher education and system reforms through Erasmus+ projects;

2/ Implementing the EU Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region called "EU-SHARE";

Last year, the European Higher Education Fair that was organised in Manila brought together twenty-seven European Higher Education Institutions from 12 European Union Member States.

The EU SHARE programme specifically support institutions in ASEAN that are developing regional higher education frameworks of Quality Assurance, Qualification Frameworks and credit transfer.

Through this programme, the EU shares its experience and expertise on the development of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) which are relevant to institutions in ASEAN. These frameworks contribute to mutual recognition; enhance the quality, regional competitiveness and internationalisation of ASEAN higher education institutions.

Let me now move to the issue of gender equality. It is obvious that there are wide disparities from one country to another in terms of gender inequality.

Within the ASEAN region, I am actually pleased to observe that it is the Philippines, the country where I am actually posted that performs best in the region. According to a 2014 study of the World Economic Forum, the Philippines ranked 9th in the world in terms of gender equality, as compared to countries like Malaysia and Cambodia that only ranked 107 and 108 respectively.

According to a report from Glassdoor Economic Research, Sweden and Norway are found to have the best overall balance between men and women in work within Europe, as compared to Greece and Italy which have the worst.

Equality between women and men is one of the European Union's founding values. It goes back to 1957 when the principle of equal pay for equal work became part of the Treaty of Rome. The European Union's achievements in fostering equality between women and men have helped to change the lives of many European citizens for the better.

Although inequalities still exist, the EU has made significant progress over the last decades. This is mainly thanks to: equal treatment legislation; gender mainstreaming (integration of the gender perspective into all other policies) and specific measures for the advancement of women. Some encouraging trends include the increased number of women in the labour market and their progress in securing better education and training.

However, gender gaps remain and in the labour market, women are still over-represented in lower paid sectors and under-represented in decision-making positions.

An EU Strategic engagement for gender equality 2016-2019 was published in December 2015. It sets the framework for the Commission's future work towards improving gender equality.

The Strategic engagement focuses on the following five priority areas:

1. Increasing female labour market participation and equal economic independence;
2. Reducing the gender pay, earnings and pension gaps and thus fighting poverty among women;
3. Promoting equality between women and men in decision-making;
4. Combating gender-based violence and protecting and supporting victims;
5. Promoting gender equality and women's rights across the world.

Let me focus on the last priority which is most relevant for our discussion today.

The EU is and remains at the forefront for advancing gender equality in its relations with non-EU countries. The EU presents political demarches, funds programmes aimed at combatting specific problems and discrimination suffered by women and girls of all ages. The EU supports women's associations, and uses a rights-based approach in all its initiatives. Gender equality is further mainstreamed into programmes and measures to promote equality between women and men in all different fields of activity.

The EU firmly supports gender equality and empowerment of women worldwide, because empowering women can significantly reduce poverty, for instance through increased production, rising household incomes, and improved child health and education levels.

The EU also works hard to ensure that girls and women have full and equal access to education, healthcare, sanitation and employment possibilities and do not suffer from any forms of violence and discrimination.

In the area of humanitarian assistance, the EU supports actions that prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in humanitarian crises, both through mainstreaming targeted actions and capacity building.

Let us hope that by promoting participation of women in people-people exchanges, the EU and ASEAN will contribute to enhancing gender equality in our two regions.

I thank you for your attention.