

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Thank you Chairman,

Dear participants,

I would like to begin by congratulating Minister Necas and the Czech presidency for this successful conference.

During these two days, I think that we have had the opportunity to see family policy in all its complexity.

Family policy is a difficult field as it concerns a part of life that is private, and where our needs and preferences may differ to a great extent.

Therefore, it must be fundamental for family policies to recognize that families are different and that they have different needs.

Family policies should be about creating the necessary preconditions for men and women to realize their wishes of having children without sacrificing other ambitions, for example in the working life.

Family policy can also serve as an important instrument in order to meet the challenge of demography by promoting work force participation and higher birth rates.

Several countries, including my own, have seen that policies for reconciliation of work and family life including measures such as a flexible parental insurance, affordable childcare services and individual taxation can result in the fortunate combination of high birthrates and high rates of employment among women.

These measures also have positive effects on gender equality, and they can promote gender equality in working life.

The key issue for successful family policies is freedom of choice. And the core of these policies must be the best interest of the child.

However, it is a fact that children need and take time. Children need the love and care of parents for their development and upbringing. It is important to note that children's need of their both parents is actually formulated as a right in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Children also need the stimulation and the pedagogy of pre-schools of good quality. And they need to spend time with other children. All these aspects are important for the well being of children.

But just like families, children are different, and they have different needs. And parents know the best interest of their individual child better than politicians. This is why it is so important that we can provide services such as childcare to families who need it. Because without options, there can be no real freedom of choice.

The Member States have agreed on important common objectives for the availability of childcare. In addition, it is important that we continue our discussions on the quality of childcare. We must have high demands on the quality of childcare in order to make it a relevant choice for parents.

And we need more studies and research on the impact on children of different kinds of childcare so that parents can make informed choices. And we need to continue our discussions and exchanges of good practice in the field of family policy.

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Sweden has had an ambitious and flexible family policy model for many years. We have a cross cutting political consensus on the fundamentals of this model. This makes the system predictable and secure. Men and women can feel safe in the knowledge of what the conditions will be if they would become parents.

The flexibility and the fundamental value of the freedom of choice in this system also creates a situation where the parents in a family are equal. In Sweden we have seen strong indications that gender equality in the family provide both stable family situations with reduced risk for separations as well as higher birth rates.

In order to promote for men and women to take an active and equal responsibility for their parenthood and the informal work that is made in the home, we have recently introduced a gender equality bonus. The aim of this bonus is to promote the equal sharing of parental leave between the parents without taking away their autonomy. It provides incentives for the mother to work and for the father to take more responsibility in the home.

In addition to this, we have recently introduced a child raising allowance that enables parents to make a smoother transition between parental leave and work. This allowance is voluntary and it can be used for the care of children who are not enrolled in full time public childcare. The allowance can be combined with paid employment. In order not to distance parents from the labour market, the allowance can not be combined with other social security benefits which are due to sickness or unemployment.

In the near future we intend to introduce a child care voucher. This voucher will increase parents' freedom to

choose the provider of the childcare. This voucher can also finance care that parents are giving their children in the home, under the condition that they also take care of other children than their own.

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Before I end my speech I would like to say that we are very pleased that minister Necas has taken this initiative to debate family policy and the best interest of the child. And I am looking forward to continuing these discussions during the Swedish presidency in Autumn.

On the 20th of November the Swedish Minister for Social Affairs Mr Göran Hägglund will host a conference to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the UN Convention on the rights of the child. We will touch upon several themes during this conference, of which one will be policies for reconciliation of work and family life and the best interest of the child.

Thank you