

Women Ambassadors in Italy (WAI)
Final Meeting of the Italian Ambassadors Network

Florence, 20 January 2011

9.30 am

**Auditorium di Sant'Apollonia
Via San Gallo, 25 –Florence, Italy**

**European Commission's Actions to Promote and Support
Female Entrepreneurship in Europe**

Dear Ambassadors, Distinguished guests,

I am very happy to be among so many active ambassadors today and I would like to thank you for inviting me to your final WAI meeting. I am pleased to have this chance to meet you all and hear about your very valuable work as ambassadors these last 2 years.

Your commitment and determination to promote and support female entrepreneurship in Italy and beyond is an example for all of us and rest assured that the Commission will always recognise and value your efforts to raise the image of female entrepreneurship in our society.

I was also very pleased to hear about your manifesto which encompasses many of the values and goals that we wanted to achieve at the Commission when we created the ambassadors' network and I would like to congratulate you on taking up this initiative to write such a clear, easily understood and concrete document that will give more impetus to the ambassadors' work. Your aspiration, to develop your activities beyond the ambassadors' network initial scope shows your determination and energy.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the Unioncamere Toscana and all partners in Italy that worked extremely hard on the ambassadors' network. Italy is the only country that has been able to include so many regions in the ambassadors' project (16 out of 20 regions). I was very glad to find out that you have organised more than 1.300 events during these 2 years across Italy and mobilised 31 ambassadors for these activities.

Representatively for all 31 ambassadors, I will only mention Mrs. Mariarosy Calleri who has produced today's manifesto for the Italian's ambassadors network and Mrs Katia Marchesin who has been a multiple host entrepreneur under the Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs programme. Congratulations to all you

ambassadors for your hard work and commitment to promoting female entrepreneurship to the prominence it deserves.

Let me now talk about the European initiatives that promote female entrepreneurship.

We all agree that entrepreneurs are indispensable to Europe's economic growth, employment, competitiveness and prosperity. They are the people who have the creative ideas, drive and determination to set up new small businesses: the buds out of which big enterprises can emerge. In particular, we should not forget that 80% of new jobs in Europe are created by SMEs.

Yet women entrepreneurs constitute **only 34.4% of the self-employed** in EU25 (Eurostat) and only 20% in industry. Their share in **start-ups is around 30%**.

It is clear that female creativity and entrepreneurial potential are a source of economic growth and new jobs that should be further developed. In a time of crisis we cannot afford to forego this potential!

We therefore have to encourage the creation of more women-led businesses in our societies. This will not only bring fresh business ideas and new ways of doing business but it will also empower women economically, socially and create new sources of welfare and jobs.

It is clear that entrepreneurship fits well with modern women's preoccupation of reconciling private and professional life.

The last Eurobarometer survey by the Commission (published in 2010) shows that women are more likely than men to opt for self-employment because of the **freedom to choose the place and time of work** or because they have a member of family or a friend who is also self-employed (33.5% of women to 27.1% of men).

However, it is a fact that women face a number of difficulties in establishing and running their businesses which are more significant than for men. These are due to factors such as:

- **a poor business environment** (especially: access to finance and gender stereotypes),
- **the choice of business types and sectors** (retail and services preferred by women),

- **information gaps,**
- **lack of contacts and access to networking,**
- **gender discrimination and stereotypes,**
- **weak and inflexible supply of childcare facilities,**
- **difficulties in reconciling business and family obligations, as well as**
- **differences in the way women and men approach entrepreneurship.**

To successfully spur female entrepreneurship, these issues need to be addressed in a coherent manner both at European and national level.

The economic crisis has had an impact on a lot of small businesses owned by women since **reduced purchasing power** has a greater **influence in areas in which women entrepreneurs are active**, such as the retail sector and services.

On the other hand, due to the crisis many women that lost their jobs or saw their family income decreasing have decided to take a chance and look for a new career in entrepreneurship.

We should not forget that since women attach **more importance to family circumstances** when considering setting up a business, **are more cautious than men and their awareness of risk of failure is more developed, when they decide to start a business** it is from a more feasible and realistic basis than men which in return is increasing their chances of being successful.

SBA and female entrepreneurship

It is with these facts in mind that the Commission has proposed some concrete actions to promote female entrepreneurship within the Small Business Act for Europe (in short: SBA).

- a) The first action is the one that we are all here today for: the **European Network of Female Entrepreneurship Ambassadors**. We have successfully mobilised entrepreneurs to campaign on the ground to inspire women of all ages to set up their own businesses and become entrepreneurs. We all know that role models are very important in order to motivate someone to start a new business. As some of you who participated in last December's conference in Brussels know, we today have 250 ambassadors in 22 European countries taking part in the network. These countries are: Albania, Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark,

France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway, Serbia, Slovakia, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

As you know, the first 10 countries in the European Female Entrepreneurship Ambassadors' Network became operational in the last quarter of 2009. The Network has been very successful, exceeding already in its first year of operations its objectives in terms of events organised and audience reached. The Commission has received very positive feedback both from stakeholders, the target audience, i.e., would-be women entrepreneurs, and you the ambassadors. In addition, many ambassadors have gone beyond their task to only campaign for female entrepreneurship among women of all ages: they also became actively involved in supporting the establishment of new enterprises. Thus, thanks to your work, **in 4 participating countries (we do not have data from the other) 52 new**

women-led enterprises have been created providing at least 68 new jobs.

b) In the coming weeks, the Commission will publish a call for proposals to support setting up **mentoring networks for female entrepreneurs**. This action targets women who have already started their business. We aim to mobilise experienced entrepreneurs to act as mentors to new women entrepreneurs.

We very much hope that Italy will take part at this call and will capitalise the experience it gained with you, the Italian ambassadors, to come up with a successful mentoring scheme for women entrepreneurs.

c) As decisions about future careers are made early in life, the Commission also promotes **entrepreneurship among women graduates**. We are financing a project “**women@business**” targeting women graduates that will help them consider a career as an entrepreneur in their chosen field of interest or study.

Women@business aims to support entrepreneurship on three levels enhancing the principle of 'learning, doing and reflecting'.

The project aims to provide women with the necessary theoretical and practical knowledge about entrepreneurship. It provides for the active participation of young women in enterprises working alongside successful female entrepreneurs for the attainment of valuable first-hand experience in this field. The concept of female entrepreneurship is often not treated at Universities and schools, and there is a lack of specific training in this field. As such, the project aims to fill in this gap by furthering the entrepreneurship training for young female graduates and young women from an ethnic minority or immigrant background.

d) Furthermore, the Commission has invited **Member States to provide mentoring and support** for female entrepreneurs at national level. We have also asked them to exchange best practices in promoting female entrepreneurship.

Other measures

The measures under the Small Business Act add to the already existing ones that the Commission runs. These include **the European Network to Promote Women's Entrepreneurship – WES**. The WES is composed of government representatives responsible for promoting female entrepreneurship. It has members from 31 European countries. WES members provide advice, support, information and contacts regarding existing support measures for female entrepreneurs. They also help in identifying good practices and give guidance on future policy direction.

Neither should forget Legislative action already adopted under the SBA that aims to support women entrepreneurs. The General Block Exemption Regulation on State Aids allows **state aid up to 1 million euros for small enterprises newly created by women**.

To assist networking of women entrepreneurs, the Commission has set up the **Women's Entrepreneurship Portal on EUROPA**¹. The Portal provides links to the websites of women entrepreneurs' representative organisations, networks, projects and events that relate to the promotion of female entrepreneurship. It helps finding contacts for networking and mentoring.

The Commission has also established a **European Network of Women in Decision-Making (DG EMPL)**. The network comprises 15 networks active at European or international level in promoting women's empowerment. It contributes to the search for practical solutions to remedy women's under-representation in decision-making bodies of companies, NGOs, public bodies etc. The Commission's network is a European platform for the leaders of

¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/entrepreneurship/women.htm>

existing European networks to exchange ideas and share knowledge and good practice.

Conclusion

It is clear that we need to find new and more ways to encourage more women to become entrepreneurs and to lead the existing women-led companies to stronger growth. We have to consistently support the dynamic women - like you-who are able to create and expand competitive firms – stressing that becoming an entrepreneur is not only another way to earn one’s living but a choice of a different lifestyle allowing for self-realisation and self-fulfilment. As an entrepreneur, one can realise one’s dream and be more flexible when it comes to reconciling private and business life.

We are aware that it is not enough to create the right economic conditions and opportunities for a woman to become an entrepreneur. We also need to ensure that the right conditions are created in the environment in which women entrepreneurs live and work. (e.g., care facilities for children and elderly people).

At the end, I would like again to express my deep gratitude to all the Italian ambassadors for their hard work during these past 2 years and to stress that the Commission will continue to support women entrepreneurs during this period of economic crisis to help them maintain and grow their businesses.

To do this we count on your support as ambassadors and future mentors of female entrepreneurship. Although the project of the ambassadors is now finalised in Italy we encourage national stakeholders to take over the management of this initiative and keep the momentum going. Italian women need their entrepreneurship ambassadors to guide and support them in becoming successful businesswomen. I am sure that you will continue to work on this basis as we will also do so from our side.

Many thanks and again congratulations for a very successful conclusion of the ambassador's project.