

Dear all,

I would like to start by sharing a story from when I was a student, about a professor who made a bit of a fool of himself. We were a group of friends studying together, both boys and girls. One day, this professor was discussing with one of us – a boy – and wanted to refer to another one of us who wasn't present – a girl. He couldn't remember her name, though, so he said "You know, the short one from the north of Norway with the big [gesticulation]".

I allow myself to smile at this, because I find it tragicomic, to be honest. What this man is doing is mistakenly believing that there exists some kind of chauvinist male bond which trumps the gender-neutral bond between friends. That kind of chauvinist bond probably exists in far too many places and situations, but it did not exist in our situation, and what my male friend did was of course to tell my female friend how the conversation with the professor had played out. Rumour spread, and the professor lost a lot of respect among us students.

We can regard this as comedy – the kind of comedy where your smile is a bit twisted, because it's uncomfortable to see someone make such a fool of themselves – but there's of course a fair share of tragedy as well. This professor was good at his subject, and a lot of good learning could have come out of my female friend discussing with him. Those discussions were, however, reduced to a bare minimum as a consequence of the sexist, chauvinist, whatever you want to call it, conversation.

When the subject of harassment or unwanted sexual attention comes up, every woman and girl seems to have at least one similar story, and indeed quite a few of the men and boys as well. The moral case, in my eyes, is clear. This is unacceptable behaviour, it is degrading, it is reducing a person to an object – a pair of breasts. But as I'm pretty sure you as experts on the field will agree,

there is a much more practical case to be made. Harassment is bad for the economy. Harassment reduces learning, lowers the quality of human interaction, removes incentives to productively cooperate. And mind you, the negative economic effect is probably worse (I'm guessing, I don't have scientific data for this) in advanced knowledge-based economies like ours, because unplanned, unguided human interaction is so fundamental for the productivity of our economies, and harassment severely reduces the quality of that kind of interaction. As a taxpayer, and as a citizen, I want to thank you for being here today and discussing how we can eliminate sexual and moral harassment in the workplace.

That was my message as a taxpayer and as a citizen, and now for my message as a representative of the Norwegian Embassy. Why are we doing this as a Norwegian-Portuguese cooperation? Are there any particular similarities between harassment in our two countries? Do we both harass a lot so we really need to sit down and fix this thing? Do we harass very little so we can pride ourselves in sharing stories about how successful we've been? Well, I honestly don't know, because you're the experts here and I think I'm actually going to ask some of you these questions in the coffee break rather than try to answer them here. But I do know that Norway and Portugal are both European countries and as such we share a set of basic values, a sense of solidarity with each other and a sense of usefulness of common encounters like this seminar today.

Norway has chosen to remain outside the European Union, but we're an integrated part of the European common market through the Agreement on the European Economic Area, the EEA. As a part of the EEA Agreement, Norway – together with its partners Iceland and Liechtenstein – contributes to reduce social and economic disparity in 16 beneficiary countries in southern and eastern Europe through the financial mechanism called the EEA Grants.

Portugal is one of the beneficiary countries; Portugal receives some 58 million euros in the current five year mechanism. There are eight programmes in Portugal, and one of them – this one – addresses questions related to gender equality and work-life balance.

I already know – from having spoken to both sides of the cooperation – that we both have a lot to learn from each other. In addition to the goal of reducing social and economic disparities, the second main goal of the EEA Grants is namely this: to strengthen the bilateral relations between donor countries and beneficiary countries. I said I was grateful as a citizen, but I am also grateful as a Norwegian diplomat that this cooperation is taking place and that you're having high quality discussions about such an important topic. At least this is one assembly where I am completely confident that the interaction happens 100 % free of harassment, so there's no downward stress on the quality of ideas exchange that way.

Dear participants, dear organisers: Thank you for inviting me, enjoy the seminar, and good luck with future cooperation!