What contributed towards the establishment of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)?

There was an international conference in Sweden in 1999, during which the Swedish Minister for Gender Equality raised a proposal for an agency on gender equality. It took a long time to reach the decision as there were many different Member State processes involved.

Before adoption of the formal decision, the European Parliament and the Commission carried out two feasibility studies analysing the necessity to start a special agency addressing gender issues. In December 2006, the European Parliament and the Council adopted the legal document establishing the Institute.

When did your involvement in gender equality begin?

In 1997, I was working for the Swedish Association for Local and Regional Authorities, focusing more on international development and cooperation. I was given the responsibility to coordinate the work on gender equality and began developing my first projects – at the same time reading, learning, expanding the competence and collating all the necessary data and background information.

From a political perspective, we were also supporting and training women candidates in different countries, exploring the links between such areas as gender and HIV in Africa. We also looked at the importance of human resources and strategies for developing, for example, projects on water and sanitation and gender, and how to support governments in addressing these issues.

How did this engagement lead to your current position as Director of EIGE?

I didn't apply during the first round because the vacancy announcement was very much connected to managerial experience, and not so much on gender equality expertise. I wasn't keen on simply administrative/management work. During the second round, however, there seemed to be more gender equality knowledge requirements. When I applied, the questions were very mixed during the different interviews and assessments. They needed a range of expertise and managerial skills. It would have been very difficult if I hadn't worked on gender equality beforehand, as well as several other knowledge areas that were required to fulfil my position at the Institute.

How did the Gender Equality Index become connected with the European Commission (EC)'s Strategy for Equality between Women and Men 2010–2015?

The idea of creating the Index was first discussed and introduced in the roadmap, which guided the EC’s work before the Strategy for Equality between Women and Men 2010–2015. First proposal of an Index was commissioned by the EC within the framework of the roadmap.

We expanded this approach for the Index, and created a new concept based on a lot of research and discussion. As our index was adopted into the Strategy, we developed it further as a robust monitoring tool, including new aspects, for example, satellite domains and issues of violence against women, and also intersecting inequalities such as age and gender, sexual orientation and gender, and disability and gender.

Can you elaborate on EIGE’s methods and tools of practice?

Our methods and tools are connected through our gender mainstreaming work. In order to do this, we need to have functioning methods, understandable approaches and concrete statistics. These are all influential tools in areas where gender equality is not naturally present.

Specifically for gender mainstreaming, we are focusing on capacity building tools. This is an objective, for instance, for all military and diplomatic staff of all Member States and EU delegations in developing countries – in particular, those in conflict. There is an obligation for
Our study of female genital mutilation (FGM) was the first EU-wide study to evaluate FGM prevalence. From this, we realised that even definitions of FGM differ between regions, and that practitioners do not always have the correct gender training. We now want to propose a strategic framework for our work on violence against women. This is an important step because each Member State is bound to implement a victim’s directive or protection order if a victim moves from one Member State to another, and must ensure that she has the same guarantee of support. The main focus for us now is to agree on and harmonise the definitions, so that we can have a common agreement and work towards a common goal.

Intimate partner violence is also a huge problem. We recently launched another study, led by a very well-known expert on gender mainstreaming, Sylvia Walby, on our behalf. Different methods to count and assess the costs for the public services as well as for the victims (short- and long-term impact) and their children, were identified and analysed.

In addition, we are thinking of developing a ‘minimum model’ approach so that the Member States can conduct their own calculations. In so doing, we provide means to appeal to decision makers or redirect planning efforts by showing that conducting more early prevention not only helps prevent a victim’s suffering, but also saves the budget for other priorities.

How important is the involvement of men in ameliorating the issues of gender inequality?

Men are very important; we have been discussing their involvement and engagement for many years. Men who make the decisions are not usually those who attend conferences or meetings on gender equality. It is possible they do not have time to go deeper in the area, or that concrete connection to gender equality and their everyday life is insufficiently visible; however, we must find a new approach to show this added value. At the European Parliament in Brussels in December, we had men engaging in a violence against women campaign. The Institute is trying to obtain role models for drawing young men into the debate to change attitudes towards violence against women.

EIGE is also trying to convey that we are a gender equality Institute – it’s not only for women’s empowerment. There are areas where men are the minority; for example, education, where women are outnumbering men, or life expectancy. We have discussed issues with the leading European men’s organisations in order to join forces and work towards closing the gender gap.