



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
LOBBY
EUROPEEN DES FEMMES

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President
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Charles Michel
President of the European Council

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Subject: Women at the forefront of the COVID-19 pandemic calling to strengthen the European Social Model

Dear President,

I am writing to you as President of the European Women's Lobby (EWL), the largest organisation of women's organisation representing over 2000 associations in the EU and accession countries. Through the input from our member organisations from across Europe, the EWL is very well placed to testify of the **widespread effect of the COVID-19 crisis on women and girls**. Women's organisations within EWL membership are reporting about the dire situations of women and girls increasingly at risk of violence, poverty and threats to their economic independence. Women made vulnerable and excluded in our society are particularly at risk of being even more pushed to the sidelines or at risk of serious harm if not given specific consideration in designing the response to and recovery from this unprecedented crisis.

A collective EU response is urgently required to face the immediate and exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, that threatens the political, economic and social cohesion of all countries in the EU. The consequences of the current pandemic are likely to lead to widespread economic disruption that threatens to generalise unemployment, increased precarity and poverty, disproportionately affecting women, particularly in the most disadvantaged social groups.

I have no doubt that you recognise the **role women are currently playing in saving lives and maintaining social cohesion in the current COVID-19 pandemic**. Across the EU, more than 10 million women make up more than 3 times the amount of men employed in health settings.ⁱ Women also work on average 6 hours longer per week than men in total (paid and unpaid) with fewer paid hours.ⁱⁱ It is now urgent to recognise care as the backbone of society, to strengthen European solidarity and reinforce the European Social Model, which Europe has and must continue to uphold. This must be done in line with the European Commission's five-year **Gender Equality Strategy**, to ensure that recovery efforts are gender-responsive and the rights of women and girls.

In preparation of the forthcoming **ECOFIN Council meeting of 7 April**, we urge you to show strong leadership in strengthening solidarity among and between EU Member States **providing a vision for the future of Europe that is more inclusive and sustainable for all**. We call on you to encourage Member States to urgently take exceptional budgetary measures at the EU level and agree on:

- Loosening the strict criteria of the European Stability Pact to enable Member States to invest in gender responsive public services and support the care sector. **Saving lives must be our priority now.** The ESP criteria have put Member States under tremendous strain to cut public spending over the last decade, which has led to massive reductions in public services, the effect of which can be seen today. Cuts in education, care, health, pay, pensions, etc have disproportionately impacted on women, jeopardising their economic independence. We must now make sure that public services are supported and prioritised, ensuring investment is built on sex disaggregated data and gender mainstreaming is applied across the board.
- Redirecting **Cohesion Funds** under the **current Multiannual Financial Framework** (MFF, 2014-2020) to enable Member States to invest in social cohesion, which is crucial as we face uncertainties and long-term socio-economic, health and environmental consequences of the pandemic. No country is spared; **we are all in this together** and must be in solidarity with each other. We urge you to instruct Member States, as a pre-condition of additional cohesion funding, to direct this to ensure equality between women and men, in compliance with their obligations under the Lisbon Treaty (Article 2)ⁱⁱⁱ, the **gender mainstreaming** clause of the TFEU (Article 8)^{iv} and the Charter of Fundamental Rights (Article 23)^v.

The European Women's Lobby also calls on you to make sure that long-term responses are adopted to answer the other crisis now threatening our economy. To protect in particular women and the most vulnerable, we urge you and EU Member States to **increase investments in the next MFF** (2021-2027) to act now, with solid and long lasting instruments, and to avoid repeating the mistakes of 2008: initially encouraging states to increase public spending to face the crisis and subsequently, in 2010, leaving over-indebted states to face draconian austerity programs.

We urge you to show leadership as the future budget is being negotiated to:

- maintain the level of 1.3% GNI contributions proposed by the European Parliament;
- invest in the care economy: it is crucial that the lessons learned from this pandemic and of the last decade serve to demonstrate that we cannot take risks with lives. We need a **Care Deal for Europe**, for which the future EU budget must prioritise.
- Fund concrete measures for implementation of **gender mainstreaming** (including gender budgeting) and a financial guarantee to support **women's organisations** and services, as it is now clear that women, at the forefront of this pandemic, are the backbone of society.

We also call on you and EU Member States to instruct the **European Investment Bank**, to direct its annual 80 billion € budget to invest in the **care economy**^{vi} as a sustainable economic model to help the recovery from this crisis, and in total compliance with its own Strategy on Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment.^{vii} This has the potential for huge job creation on equal footing with the green economy and digital economy, whilst further addressing low pay, high rates of part-time work, and poor working conditions across all sectors, notably health and care.

In this difficult time, European leaders must rise to the challenge and take exceptional measures to preserve cohesion and what's the essence of the European project: solidarity. We trust that you will give your utmost attention to our demands and to ensure Europe will get out stronger from this crisis.

Yours sincerely,



Gwendoline Lefebvre
EWL President

ⁱ https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/indicator/ta_wrklab_lab_employ_selected_healthcare_lfsa_eagan22d_hlth/bar

ⁱⁱ https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/just/document.cfm?doc_id=50074

ⁱⁱⁱ Article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty states: The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

^{iv} Article 8 of the TFEU states: In all its activities, the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality, between men and women.

^v Article 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights states: Equality between women and men must be ensured in all areas, including employment, work and pay. The principle of equality shall not prevent the maintenance or adoption of measures providing for specific advantages in favour of the under-represented sex.

^{vi} See the European Women's Lobby, "Purple Pact: A feminist approach to the economy", 2019,

https://womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/purplepact_publication_web.pdf

^{vii} https://www.eib.org/attachments/strategies/eib_group_strategy_on_gender_equality_en.pdf