



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
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Women's Socio Economic Rights and Gender Equality from a life-cycle perspective On occasion of the European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations Presented at the EWL Annual Conference, Budapest, 11 May 2012

We, members of the **European Women's Lobby**, reaffirm that a sustainable future for the European Union and the world is possible only if all women, men, girls and boys are free to contribute equally to society regardless of where they are situated in the 'circle of life'.

We affirm that gender relations strongly impact the entire life cycle from birth to old age, influencing access to resources and opportunities and shaping life strategies at every stage and that there cannot be wellbeing, growth or prosperity without gender equality.

We affirm that the many pressing challenges facing Europe demand long term and holistic consideration of people's different needs across the life-cycle. Only from a life-cycle perspective can we generate truly sustainable solutions. The EWL therefore calls for a gendered **life-cycle approach** in all political and economic decisions shaping Europe's future. A gendered life-cycle approach makes the links between how decisions taken at different stages of life impact on each other. Such an approach allows for the identification of the necessary political measures in various phases and at transitional points in women's lives. An example of this are the links between the gender pay and pension gaps which disadvantage women throughout their lives as they earn less and subsequently have lower pensions.

We are concerned that economic policies are increasingly disconnected from the real lives of women and men in the EU. Many of the current austerity measures are not based on long term societal considerations but on short term budgetary restrictions due to private intervention (notably by rating agencies). Such policies are neither democratic nor sustainable for the present generation or for the future generations of women and men.

We recall that such non-sustainable solutions to the economic, social and demographic crisis hit women particularly hard as witnessed by a number of studies¹. We are outraged by the economic policies that are leading the world. We condemn the way in which the constant search for profit is destroying the planet and human beings. Human beings have lost their place in the hierarchy of values. It is urgent to remedy this and to stop this disastrous spiral.

We are concerned that women's rights and gender equality are slipping off the political agenda and we oppose any backlash or loss of the freedoms, rights and opportunities generated by women and women-friendly societies in the past. The EU cannot afford it; the women of Europe will not accept it.

We demand that women's rights and gender equality irrespective of age be placed at the heart of all policies and addressed at the highest political level². Gender inequalities are costly; equality between women and men must be considered as an investment.

¹ Notably, European Women's Lobby/Oxfam International Women's poverty and social exclusion in the European Union at a time of recession, An Invisible Crisis?, March 2010

² An example of best practice can be found in Council of Europe with the establishment of a Gender Equality Commission which seeks to ensure a gender perspective in all its activities



We recall that women constitute more than half of the European population and will represent a growing majority as Europe ages. Over the past few decades, women have contributed more to the expansion of the world economy than either new technologies or the emerging markets of China and India combined³.

We call for change in the way women are perceived in policy-making which characterises women as a 'group' and in particular a 'vulnerable' or discriminated 'minority' group. Women also represent the majority in many "minority groups" (older people, people with disability etc.). Women's equal rights and participation in all areas of life must be secured to *all* women irrespective of their different age, circumstances and backgrounds.

We affirm that women's economic independence throughout the life-cycle is a cornerstone in reaching gender equality. The independence of women and their fullest contribution to society can be achieved only if men and women work together to ensure equal access to paid and unpaid work, education and share burdens, responsibilities and power, benefits and freedoms equally throughout the life-cycle.

The European Women's Lobby therefore makes the following recommendations:

Policy-makers should engage with women of all ages and backgrounds and their representative organisations in the design, implementation and evaluation of all policies and measures that seek to achieve women's economic independence and active participation in all areas on an equal footing with men throughout their life-cycle.

2

Economic and Social policies

Ensure commitments related to equality between women and men in the EU 2020 Strategy and the goals set forth herein *for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*: A dignified violence-free life for all, equal access to quality education opportunities, decent and equal wages and income. This should be mirrored in all of the processes of the EU2020 Strategy: The Annual Growth Survey, National Reform Programmes, National Stability and Convergence Programmes, Country-Specific Recommendations, Joint Employment Report, Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion and.

Adopt binding legislation for the equal representation of women and men in decision-making, including on corporate boards as proposed by European Commission Vice-president Reding. Work towards the equal representation of women and men in view of the elections for the European Parliament and nomination of the new European Commission in 2014 as well as in the subsequent allocations of EU 'Top Jobs'. In line with the EU's Treaty commitments to democracy and fundamental rights, parity in decision-making in all spheres and at all levels is an issue of democratic representation, legitimacy and of social progress at both EU and national levels. Account should also be taken of age, ethnicity and social origins.

Apply alternative economic models which are sustainable for the people and the planet. Such models should introduce new ways of valuing the 'care economy', the contributions of which have so far been disregarded in economic decision making. Care work, paid or unpaid, formal or informal must be reassessed and re-prioritised politically so that investments in the sector reflect the fundamental economic and social contributions this sector brings to society. The focus on the care economy is a prerequisite for the economy as a whole: women and men can contribute equally to society while raising future generations only when proper care infrastructures are in place. As the population ages, caring needs of the elderly and dependents are also rising. To ensure sustainability, care must therefore increasingly be addressed politically and economically as a common societal responsibility.

³ The Economist, *The importance of sex*, 12 April 2006



Care and employment policies

Place the care sector on an equal footing with other 'job rich' growth sectors of the economy, namely the 'green economy' and 'ICT' in the EU2020 Strategy. These sectors should seek to create a gender inclusive labour market which focuses on job creation policies.

Ensure fully paid maternity, paternity, parental, carer's and educational leave for both women and men to avoid economic sanctions later in life, such as insufficient pensions (mostly affecting women), due to caring responsibilities. Governments must move forward in negotiating with the European Parliament on the revised Maternity Leave Directive. In particular they must ensure full pay for the entire duration of maternity and paternity leave and the full protection of women returning to work after childbirth. Finally, the issue of pay during maternity leave cannot be dissociated from the gender pay gap. Maternity leave should be promoted politically as one of the factors to closing the gender pay gap which women experience throughout their lives.

Guarantee women's full participation on the labour-market regardless of their level of education and in particular young women. **Women of child bearing age continue to be perceived as "risky"** due to their **potential** child birth/child care and this, results in direct discrimination against women in accessing and remaining in the labour-market.

Guarantee women's full access to **life-long learning**, regardless of their level of education, to enable women to acquire new skills to facilitate their upgrading in a changing work environment and/or reorientation towards professional careers.

Ensure quality employment policies for women of all ages, in particular women over 50, so that they are considered as a valued work force.

Ensure that equality between women and men is promoted through the **flexicurity** strategy applied in the current re-designing of the labour-market. "**Security**" can have different meanings for men and women in general and throughout different stages of life: Security as a prerequisite for free choices, security not to be discriminated against, security to find quality employment, security that dependents are being taken care of, security that someone takes care of you, security to have equal wages and pensions and take-home pay and decent adequate income in the periods out of the labour market. Make binding gender equality objectives and practical outcomes of *flexicurity* including: **realising and strengthening the Barcelona childcare targets**, going 'beyond Barcelona' towards increasing the provision, quality, affordability and accessibility of care services including **quality care for the elderly**.

Pay and pensions

We affirm that the gender pay and pension gaps are the two sides of the same coin. The gender pension gap mirrors gender inequalities accumulated throughout women's lives, which increases women's risk of poverty and social exclusion as they age.

We call for 'zero tolerance' of the gender pay gap and demand urgent measures to address all the elements that maintain women's income at a lower level than men's throughout their lives including a binding European target to **reduce the gender pay gap by minimum 5 % per year in each Member State**. This requires *inter alia*: valuing pay and working conditions and strengthening women's bargaining power in sectors of the economy where women are the majority (primarily care, health, education, and retail, public and social services); addressing the highly gender segregated labour market, particularly in the green and ICT sectors and making the care sector attractive to men; **guaranteeing transparency in the composition of wages**.



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We call for an **EU gender pension gap indicator**, as one of the means to track and address the gender impact of reforms in pension systems that are currently underway in most EU Member States.

Social Security and Taxation Policies

We deplore that women continue to be considered as 'dependents' or 'second earners' in taxation and social security systems and ask that such concepts should stop being used in policy documents.

Ensure individualisation of rights with regards to social security and taxation to establish a balance between women and men with regards to social security benefits and individual taxation.

Make closing the gender pay gap a macro-economic priority. This will have a **positive impact on social security** systems as women's contribution to these systems will increase when women's earnings raise and moreover make women less reliant on social benefits to cover shortfalls in income gained through paid work.

Redefine outdated concepts in relation to household composition and family models and **provide gender disaggregated data** and measures to address the feminisation of poverty throughout the life cycle. The nuclear family/male-breadwinner model is less and less dominant in European societies. This change requires a redefinition of women's status within families and new ways of defining social security and taxation. This redefinition has significant implications for the way we measure poverty for instance: both 'single parents' and 'cohabitants' are at increased risk of poverty and women make up the majority of both groups. This insight requires a gendered breakdown of data which is not currently common practice.
