



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
LOBBY
EUROPEEN DES FEMMES

Gwendoline Lefebvre
President
European Women's Lobby
18 Rue Hydraulique, 1210 Brussels
Brussels, 3 April 2020

President Ursula von der Leyen,
European Commission, Berlaymont,
1049 Brussels, Belgium.

Copy to:

Executive Vice-President Dombrovskis for "An economy that works for people"

Commissioner for Equality Dalli

Re: COVID-19 pandemic impact on women and girls and immediate responses needed from the European Commission

Dear President,

Through the ongoing 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.

Women form the large majority of health workers, food shop cashiers, service providers and care takers. We must recognise that the central role of women, and the precarious situation for so many, is due to **the disproportionate representation of women in the care sector, and how this sector has not only historically been undervalued, but particularly devalued further through austerity measures undertaken in recent years**.

It is in a moment such as the current pandemic when our eyes can only be further opened to the full impact of austerity measures, and we must turn the tide for the sake of our society and our future generations. This requires not only immediate responses in areas of **healthcare** (physical and mental health), **combatting violence against women and girls**, and ensuring **women's economic independence**, but also a longer-term transformational response. Together with our members, we are currently developing detailed recommendations on these areas which we will make sure to share very soon with Commissioner for Equality Helena Dalli.

Under your leadership, the European Commission must play its vital role in responding to the crisis: through acting not only as a linking point between Member States in this time of need but also providing a vision for the future of Europe that is more inclusive, equal and sustainable for all.

This can be achieved urgently through ensuring in the upcoming negotiations that **Member States are fully enabled to invest in gender responsive public services**, by:

- loosening the criteria of the European Stability Pact, to enable Member States to invest in gender responsive public services and support the care sector;
- redirecting Cohesion Funds, within the current MFF, to ensure that mechanisms of solidarity between and amongst Member States;
- instructing Member States to apply a gender equality perspective in their spending priorities of European funds and any future stimulus and investment policies, in compliance with their obligations under Article 8 of the Lisbon Treaty.

Member States must also be urgently requested to declare as **“essential services” all the support services to women** as helplines and shelters for women victim of male violence, migrant women, homeless women and those affected by prostitution. The necessary funds must be allocated to ensure the full continuity of these services while protecting beneficiaries and workers from the spread of the virus. The Commission can also play a key role in sharing the best examples of Member State responses to this, whether regarding legal interventions, service provision or awareness raising.

In the mid-term, it can be achieved through the prioritisation and coordinated implementation of the **Gender Equality Strategy and a revised proposal for the next MFF (2021-2027) to:**

- ensure funding for concrete measures for implementation of gender mainstreaming (including gender budgeting) and a financial guarantee to support women’s organisations and services;
- to allocate European Commission funding and support to hold **national dialogues** and **coordinate the exchange of good practices transnationally, to include women’s organisations;**
- deliver on a **Care Deal for Europe** where women and men are equal earners-equal carers, have equal, flexible options to balance their work and care responsibilities across the life-cycle, and investing in a **care economy**.

The European Commission must deliver on promises towards **‘equal work for equal value’**, particularly in underpaid sectors such as care, education and social services. To do so, it must call on the EU’s public bank, namely, the European Investment Bank to direct its annual budget to the care sector, in line with its Strategy on Gender Equality and Women’s Economic Empowerment.

In the medium and long term, we call on the Commission to ensure **gender mainstreaming** is at the centre of the development of all policies, particularly in the context of the response to the current pandemic, climate, digitalisation and migration and; continuing working for the EU accession to the Istanbul Convention, while delivering on a **Directive on preventing and combating all forms of violence against women and girls** to align existing relevant EU legislation and strengthen measures to disrupt the full continuum of violence, aligned with the Istanbul Convention and including sexual exploitation, tackling both online and offline violence.

We would be happy to provide any further detail or support that would be of assistance and will be on hand for any specific queries. We are all standing in solidarity together through these moments of loss, and we will look forward to working with you to ensure this moment leads to a positive transformation towards a more equal, fair and feminist Europe for all.

Yours sincerely,



Gwendoline Lefebvre
President, European Women’s Lobby