



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
LOBBY
EUROPEEN DES FEMMES

Women must not pay the price for COVID-19!

Putting equality between women and men at the heart of the response to COVID-19 across Europe¹

In the global context of COVID-19 pandemic, the European Women's Lobby (EWL), the largest umbrella organisation of women's civil society in Europe representing over 2,000 women's associations, are reporting on the dire situations of women and girls who now face deepening risks of male violence, poverty and threats to their economic independence. Despite this, at the heart of this crisis, **women and women's organisations are leading in the delivery of frontline and essential services**. EWL stands in awe, admiration and gratitude for the levels of community engagement and collective solidarity as women form the majority of health, care and social workers.

This crisis reminds us that **care is the backbone of our society**. After years of austerity and cuts to social and health infrastructure, this crisis is a painful wakeup call; our society and economy has been heading in the wrong direction and now is the time to rethink our social, economic and political priorities. **Plans for redesign and renewal of our systems post COVID-19 must be based on shared values of solidarity and care.**

With this policy brief, EWL calls for recognition of the undervalued, and often invisible contributions of women, and demand the EU and national responses to this health crisis leave no woman or girl behind. In line with the European Commission's five-year **Gender Equality Strategy**, this brief reiterates the urgent need to ensure **gender mainstreaming** is at the core of all national responses and puts forward **immediate and mid to long-term recommendations** to the European Commission and EU Member States. These recommendations focus on the need to uphold **democratic principles; combat male violence against women**; realising a feminist economy of care and a strong and equal health system.

Supporting equality and promoting democratic principles

In light of this crisis, many EU countries have been granted special powers to address urgent health and socioeconomic needs, yet whilst we applaud governments' responses and the emergency measures introduced, we must nonetheless remain vigilant. Our democratic systems could become fragile in the absence of stringent democratic accountability and transparency mechanisms.

EWL urges governments to ensure these measures are **set within the margins of this crisis and with a clear end date**. EU Member States plans for recovery must include **gender mainstreaming mechanisms** and the use of **sex-disaggregated data** throughout the whole process. **Women's civil society** who are essential in delivering tailored services must be **fully funded** and **consulted across all levels of decision-**

¹ For the longer version of this paper, please see here: https://womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/ewl_policy_brief_on_covid-19_impact_on_women_and_girls-2.pdf

making and in the long-term, the **EU's long-term budget must further ensure that women and girls do not face the brunt of austerity ever again.**

Tackling the surge of male violence against women and girls is a matter of emergency

Whilst men's violence against women is a long-term systemic issue across Europe, lockdown and isolation measures create an enabling environment for abusers' coercive control of victims and lead to more incidents of physical, psychological and sexual violence. Data and testimonies indicate an increase in cases of male violence against women and girls throughout Europe.

EWL demands that law enforcement units must be especially attentive to the **early identification of women victims**, while judicial systems ensure women's continued **access to justice** and the **prevention of re-victimisation**. All EU Member States must **ensure the provision of health, financial and protection services, including increased funding for shelters for women and girls who are victims of male violence, for homeless women and for asylum seeking women**. This reality reiterates the need for EU concerted action against this widespread breach of women's rights and that all EU Member States urgently ratify and implement the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, the **Istanbul Convention**.

Realising feminist economics and moving to an economy of care

A recent study of the European Institute for Gender Equality shows that women represent a majority of frontline workers in the current crisis with 82% of cashiers, 93% of childcare workers and teachers, 95% of domestic cleaners and helpers, and 86% of personal care workers². Women's paid and unpaid care work is what allows society to function, yet women continue to make up the bulk of those taking on precarious, underpaid and often invisible jobs that lack access to social protection. With this crisis, women face the highest risks of losing their jobs, experiencing poverty and the ramifications of austerity measures, with others balancing employment with traditionally feminised care roles for children and sick or elderly family members.

Gender-responsive social and financial support must be provided, particularly to women with precarious jobs and irrespective of their legal status, and the **current EU budget must also redistribute its Cohesion Funds** to offset any socio-economic, health and environmental consequences of the crisis.

Europe must use this opportunity to rethink what is essential and 'valued' to society and the economy by investing in a **Care Deal for Europe** (as set out in our [Purple Pact](#)), that addresses low quality working conditions in the health and care sectors, whilst creating new job opportunities, and closing the gender care, pay, pension and poverty gaps

Ensuring health is a central priority in all our societies' responses

Our healthcare workers - 76% of which are women - face the greatest risk of infection and. Women more broadly face significant risk to their health as they give birth alone, experience reduced access to contraception and urgent abortion services. Older women face the highest risk to COVID-19, particularly those over 80 years of age, with pre-existing health conditions, or residing in nursing homes. At EWL, our thoughts go out to those who are too often left on the margins of society: **women and girls with**

² <https://eige.europa.eu/covid-19-and-gender-equality/frontline-workers>

disabilities, older women, asylum seeker women and girls, Roma women and girls, women with underlying health conditions, and women impacted by prostitution.

The need for robust health and care infrastructure and sufficient support is undeniable. All EU Member States must **immediately recognise women's sexual reproductive health and rights as essential health services and access to regularised health services** must be made safe and available for all women, based on the **principles of non-discrimination. Increased financial support and equal access to social protection services must be made available for all frontline and essential service workers, irrespective of their migration status.**

Recommendations for solidarity, care and transformation

EWL calls on the EU and its Member States to take immediate and long-term actions to ensure all women and girls in Europe:

- are included in decision-making processes of all emergency responses and the European plans for redesign and renewal of our systems, in consultation with women's civil society organisations;
- receive tailored emergency responses that include women's perspectives, draws from sex-disaggregated data, and indicates a clear end date to any restrictions to women's human rights;
- have access to fully funded and running protection services and mechanisms that support all women victims of male violence, with long-term measures in line with the Istanbul Convention;
- have access to adequate and tailored financial, social and health services in situations of precarity;
- have access to services which prioritise health and wellbeing, and in which they can exercise their sexual and reproductive rights in full;
- have their invaluable contributions to society and the economy recognised through the adoption and full funding of a Care Deal for Europe.

Now is the time to critically shift the paradigm and rethink our current system in a way that places equality between women and men at the heart.



This publication has been funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union.
The information contained in the publication does not necessarily reflect the position of the European Commission.