



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
LOBBY
EUROPEEN DES FEMMES

Ministers attending the meeting of the EPSCO Council on 1 December 2011

RE: European Women's Lobby calling for more stringent gender equality policies to guide the EU2020 Strategy

Brussels, 25 November 2011

Dear Minister,

On 1 December the EPSCO Council will discuss among other things the progress made on the maternity leave directive and the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy. Ahead of the meeting, the European Women's Lobby (EWL), with its more than 2000 member organisations is the largest coalition of women's organisations in the European Union wishes to draw your attention to three issues of grave concern to its members.

1. Enter into the second reading phase of the revision of the Maternity Leave Directive based on the European Parliament's proposal

The European Parliament adopted its first reading of the Proposal amending the Directive over one year ago. Despite the invitation from the Parliament to open the negotiations, the Council has been reluctant to move to the second reading on the basis of the European Parliament's proposal.

For the EWL there is a **contradiction between on the one hand, the aim to increase women's employment rate in the context of the EU2020 Strategy and to address the demographic decline and on the other hand, the refusal to adopt measures that will facilitate these goals of which maternity leave is a necessary component.** Many of the issues crucial to women's equal participation on the labour-market are proposed in the European Parliament's position notably full pay for women during maternity leave (which will contribute to reducing the gender pay gap) and protection from dismissal on return to work. Full pay is a necessary compensation for the fact that women are not able to work during the after birth period. Information provided by our member organisations also testify that women returning to work after child birth are increasingly under pressure.

The European Parliament's position recognises the role of men and the **need for paternity leave** which, in the long run, will facilitate men's share in caring roles. We believe therefore that the European Parliament's position is a precursor to other issues relating to reconciliation between private and professional life and to an equal society where women and men can have real choices to share their multiple roles as workers and carers.

2. Strengthen the gender equality perspective in the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy

The European Pact for Gender Equality adopted in March 2011 **makes a strong commitment** to taking the gender perspective into account in the mechanisms of the Europe 2020 Strategy, calling on the Member States *"when developing and implementing their National Reform Programmes to apply a gender equality perspective and to promote gender equality policies"* and inviting *the Commission and the Council to incorporate a gender*



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
LOBBY
EUROPEEN DES FEMMES

equality perspective into the Annual Growth Survey, the Country Opinions and the Country Specific Recommendations.'

However, the EWL's assessment of the National Reform Programmes (NRPs) shows little progress despite the fact that some gender gaps are documented in many EU Member States and that some specific measures have been proposed to address these gaps. We regret that gender equality is not systematically mainstreamed throughout the National Reform Programmes. **The lack of gender mainstreaming means and that some of the proposals could actually increase gender inequalities**, for example measures regarding pensions which fail to take into account women's working patterns, for example involuntary part-time work. Gender equality is framed in a narrow way as the emphasis is placed on increasing women's participation in the labour market, often understood as 'second earners', failing to make the link between gender inequalities in the labour market and in the home. The needs of specific groups of women such as single parents, women with disabilities, older women before official retirement age, migrant women and Roma need to be addressed beyond issues of childcare to ensure that all women have equal access to the labour market. The gender aspects related to macro-economic guidelines are not addressed sufficiently as gender equality tends to be framed within an employment context and to a lesser extent with reference to social inclusion policies.

As the NRPs will guide the EU2020 Strategy for the coming years, there is still time to correct these shortcomings. Therefore, we urgently call for a more stringent gender mainstreaming approach within the National Reform Programmes with specific targets and measureable outcomes. We stress that stakeholder involvement, including women's organisations is crucial in developing, implementing and monitoring the National Reform Programmes.

3. Address the gendered impacts of the crisis

Studies show that gender equality priorities and policies are eroding in the context of the current crisis and austerity policies in many EU Member States. Cuts in public sector expenditure are disproportionately hitting women hardest both as workers of the public sector and beneficiaries of public services. Cuts in education, health and care services, including child and elderly care, will ultimately result in women having to pick up the pieces of the shortcomings and in so doing will unravel progress made over the past decades. Many women's organisations provide vital services and cuts in funding to these services, such as those to support women fleeing from male violence, will have a very negative impact on women and also on their children. All of these measures go against the goals and objectives of the EU2020 Strategy which aims to achieve an inclusive European society by 2020.

The way out of the crisis must involve women as well as gender impact assessments prior to austerity measures to ascertain how cuts in spending will impact on women and men respectively. The European Union cannot afford to leave half of the population pay the price of austerity measures; women's economic independence is crucial to the revival of the growth of the economy and this will only be made possible through a double approach: gender mainstreaming and specific measures for gender equality.

We trust that you will give your utmost attention to these issues.

Yours sincerely,

Brigitte Triems, EWL president

Cécile Gréboval, EWL Secretary General