



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S LOBBY FOR A FEMINIST EUROPE

BRIEFING NOTE



Briefing Note on Central Europe, the Balkans and the Baltic States for the EU's Equality Between Women and Men Strategy APRIL 2015

The EWL Task Force for Central Europe, the Balkans and the Baltic States (CEBBS Task Force) presents regional priorities for advancing women's rights and equality between women and men in the context of the new EC Equality Strategy Between Women and Men 2015-2020.

Purpose Section

The aim of this briefing note is to introduce 8 priority areas where the CEBBS Task Force calls for urgent action in order to advance women's rights and gender equality in the region. **First and foremost the European Commission should adopt a new Equality Between Women and Men Strategy. We consider that this is a key element for promoting equality between women and men as a European value throughout all EU member states and also among candidate countries. The new strategy will renew and revitalize political commitments towards gender equality. The last EU strategy overlapped with economic recession and a political turn towards populism, which marginalized efforts for equality between women and men. This note also explains why the region needs a new high-level political commitment for equality between women and men in order to reopen debates over women's rights.**

The next EU Strategy on Equality between women and men 2015-2020 needs to include a wider range of priority areas in order to effectively reduce gender inequalities in the EU and within the EU. **The next EU Strategy on Equality between women and men 2015-2020 must also reflect the needs of all women in the EU and must provide an inclusive and effective framework so that women and men have equal economic, political, social and cultural opportunities in all member states.** Targeted actions and policy measures on the 8 priorities put forth in this document should be clearly specified in all annexes and further documents accompanying the future Equality between Women and Men Strategy 2015-2020.

Background:

The CEBBS Task Force was created after the 2014 GA of EWL as a means to share information, identify common challenges and common strategies for action in the region of Central Europe, the Balkans and the Baltic States in order to promote gender equality and a context sensitive women's rights agenda. The Task Force includes members from 11 New EU member states (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, FYROM, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia), members from candidate countries (Serbia, FYROM and Turkey) as well as representatives of 2 EU wide networks representing women's right across the EU (European Network of Migrant Women and Federation of Romani and Traveller Women).

After the launching of the European Gender Equality Index in 2012¹ is it increasingly more apparent that **progress towards gender equality in the NMS and candidate countries either stalled or it is moving at an incremental pace.** Countries in Central Europe, Balkans and the Baltic States have all with the exception of Slovenia ranked below the EU-27 average scores. **The region also includes two of the countries with the lowest scores on gender equality (Bulgaria and Romania). Domains such as women's financial earnings and political and economic power are the areas where the region is falling drastically behind other parts of the EU.**

Gender stereotypes regarding women's and men's traditional gender roles are widespread in public life impeding both genders to take up equal roles in family life and share childcare and household responsibilities more equally.

Current status of women's rights and gender equality in the region

- **National Gender Equality Mechanisms**

Despite the importance and visibility of some national mechanisms, a common problem in the region is that such mechanisms have been under serious financial threat with the onset of austerity economics. **Equality mechanisms had been defunded and temporary disbanded (Romania, Slovenia) and re-emerged without its already trained staff, downgraded within ministerial structures (Hungary, Bulgaria), understuffed and under-resourced. The Equality between women and men agenda has been marginalized within governments, which results in little influence of the remaining mechanisms.** Gender equality, gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting – some of the key areas of action on the mandates of national mechanisms, still remain confuse or are not yet fully understood by decision makers themselves. Women's NGOs participation and interaction with national mechanisms varies across the region but women's rights advocates usually report it as insubstantial.

- **Women's Economic Independence**

The annual reports on the implementation of the EC Equality between Women and Men Strategy (2010-2015) stress that **gender inequalities between member states are widening with the most worrisome area being women's economic independence. The 2014 annual report states that "the trend towards equal economic independence has come to a grinding halt and in some cases it has been reversed". Most of the countries in the region are either falling further behind or losing momentum² towards reaching the planned targets on**

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² With the exception of Czech Republic, see Report on Equality Between Women and Men 2014, DG Justice.

women's labor force participation. Particularly worrisome is **women's long-term unemployment and in particular that of young women transitioning from school** to labor market (with NEET percentages reaching up to 21.5% Bulgaria in 2013).

The CEBBS Task Force reminds decision makers that the region has the largest European population at risk of poverty and social exclusion with 4 member states where 1/3 of the population is on the threshold of poverty (Bulgaria 48%, Romania 40.4%, Latvia 35.1% and Hungary 33.5%) and where up to 48% of the population suffers material deprivation. The region also has the largest population of working poor whose earnings are insufficient for daily life spending and the highest rate of child poverty, indicators that point towards a strong pattern of poverty reproduction across generations.

Single mothers and women pensioners as well as rural women and minority women have been most affected although the introduction of guaranteed basic income did in some countries impacted slightly on people facing extreme poverty. Women's safety continues to be put at risk with the chronically defunding of shelters, counseling centers and hotlines providing help to women victims of violence.

- **Women's Political Participation**

Women make up in between 10% (Ro) and 23% (EE) of elected delegates in national parliaments and score much lower when it comes to executive positions. **Women's participation in politics is very low as compared to other parts of the EU.** There is also a strong resistance to introduce quotas but with the **next Equality Between Women and Men Strategy the debate on compulsory quotas should be reopened.** In Hungary, no single woman holds a ministerial portfolio while with the exception of two women heads of state in Croatia and Estonia, there is little popular support for women candidates seeking election for the highest office. With the exception of Republic of Macedonia, Poland and Slovenia no other country in the region introduced compulsory special measures to promote women in politics. Even though some political parties have introduced some voluntary measures in order to ensure women within the rank and file of party members, quota systems are highly resisted both by traditional political parties as well as by the general public. **Women's access to politics is constrained by multiple factors including gender stereotypes and sexism within politics as well as capacity gaps leaving women without the right contacts and resources to climb party ladders.**

- **Violence Against Women and Women's Access to SRHR**

The CEBBS Task Forces notes that while some form of criminalization of domestic violence exists in the region, many countries are still reluctant to design laws for the protection and safety of women from a gender based perspective. **Special civil and criminal laws on domestic violence still use the reference to violence among family members failing to recognize the gendered dimension of domestic violence. Some states in the region fail to recognize non-physical dimensions of domestic abuse, others fail to recognize inter-partner violence among couple who are not legally registered while other states to do not comprehensively legislate against forms of violence against women such as stalking, sexual abuse or sexual harassment.** Protective measures for victims do not cover all forms of violence against women.

Women from CEE region are overrepresented in prostitution in Western Europe and victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. Laws on prostitution and trafficking are not satisfactory: some criminalize women in prostitution; there are no exit programs for women who want to stop, and laws do no focus on the demand side (buyers and pimps) and their role in perpetuating prostitutions.

There are insufficient services available to women victims of violence, some countries lacking shelter services altogether, others failing to provide helpline numbers yet others do not have specialized services for victims of sexual violence such as rape crisis centers.

Women's sexual and reproductive health and rights have been under serious attacks almost in every single country in the past 5 years. A strong coordinated and well-resourced anti-choice, homophobic lobby is very active across the region and has made headway in some countries on limiting women's reproductive choices. This anti-women lobby led to increased stigmatization of women seeking abortion, to a limiting of reproductive health services available to women as well as to powerfully stereotyping women in motherhood roles. Women's sexual and reproductive needs have to be accounted for in national health insurance schemes and where noted as missing these omissions have to be sanctioned as discriminatory practices.

Regional priorities

The CEBBS Task Force draws attention to the increasing gap within the EU regarding gender equality and women's rights and asks for immediate action at EU level as well as national level. Gender equality has been a core value of the EU enshrined in the union's founding documents, a value to **which by all member states have committed and a value that has an overwhelming popular support among EU citizens (see special Barometer 428 – Gender Equality 2015)**. The European Commission must renew its commitment to gender equality, **prioritize it by adopting a new EU Strategy on Equality Between Women and Men 2015-2020** and build political consensus for moving forward towards an inclusive and gender equal European Union. Rapid progress must be made within the CEBBS region and joint efforts must be made to bring all member states on similar levels of gender equality.

The CEBBS Task Force stresses that the next Equality between Women and Men Strategy 2015-2020 must take into account 8 priorities in order to achieve change on gender equality and women's rights in the region. The priority areas are the following:

- 1. Reclaim Feminism and Equality Between Women and Men as European Values**
- 2. Work Towards Building a Strong Women's Rights Movement in the CEBBS Region**
- 3. Ensure Women's Economic Independence and Urgently Alleviate Gender Based Poverty**
- 4. Increase Women's Participation in Politics and Increase the Number of Feminist Politicians in National Parliaments, in Local and National Governments**
- 5. Strengthen Accountable, Well-Resourced Domestic Gender Equality Mechanisms**
- 6. End Violence Against Women and Ensure Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights for All**
- 7. End Discrimination Against Roma Population, especially Romani Women; End discrimination based on Migration Status and Act for a Culture Sensitive Inclusion of Migrant Women in all European Societies**
- 8. Uphold a Peaceful Europe**

Recommendations:

General Recommendation:

Adopt a renewed EC Equality Between Women and Men Strategy for 2015-2020. This will ensure political commitment on the behalf of EU bodies as well as national governments on gender equality and the advancement of women's rights.

Recommendations on Priority 1 – Reclaiming Feminism and Equality Between Women and Men as European Values

- Decision-makers at all levels and irrespective of their political allegiance should actively promote gender equality and the long traditions of feminisms that have made possible the recognition of women as full members of our societies.
- Establish a regional or European wide campaign to highlight the contribution of women's rights activist and feminists to European History modeled on Women's History Month.
- Take active measures to recognize sexism and attacks on women's rights.
- Recognize gender equality expertise in domestic and European professional standards; develop professional standards in dialogue with domestic women's rights NGOs

Recommendations on Priority 2 – Strengthen Women's Movement in the CEBBS Region

- Allocate funding to women's rights NGOs through a variety of funding schemes that should cover both service provision and advocacy work as well as by ensuring that small women's rights NGOs have access to funding.
- Recognize women's rights NGOs knowledge and expertise and integrate their inputs into different policy areas such as economics and poverty reduction, care systems, pension reform and labor laws, civil rights, election and democratization, anti-corruption.
- Allocate funding to women's rights NGOs through a variety of funding schemes that should cover both service provision and advocacy work as well as by ensuring that small women's rights NGOs have access to funding.

Recommendations on Priority 3 - Ensure Women's Economic Independence and Urgently Alleviate Gender Based Poverty

- Set gendered targets for poverty reduction; take targeted measures to improve the living conditions of those groups who have suffered most from cutbacks, including lone mothers, women single pensioners, Romani women and rural women living from agricultural incomes
- Increase wages in female dominated public sectors such as health care and education; women's incomes must increase; more women must also benefit from job growth;
- Protect from cuts and make more affordable and accessible vital services such as crèches, women's shelters, community based health services by providing adequate level of funding for these services
- Strengthen the women's employment measures of the new EU Equality between Women and Men Strategy 2015-2020; also include targeted measures to reduce poverty and material deprivation among women, including girl child and elderly women in all member states.
- Provide significant financial incentives for women entrepreneurs; providing funding and fiscal incentives for social economy projects targeting women as main beneficiaries
- Recognize and remunerate women's unpaid care work
- Use the European Semester process and country specific recommendations to ensure the negative effects of austerity on women and gender equality will be mitigated and eliminated at national levels

Recommendation on Priority 4 - Increase Women's Participation in Politics and Increase the Number of Feminist Politicians in National Parliaments, in Local and National Governments

- Adopt compulsory temporary special measures such as quotas to encourage women's participation in politics at all levels; no parliament with less than 30% women is representative for our societies, no government without 30% women can actively implement transformative policies of gender equality;
- Introduce gender quotas for temporary employment schemes with different public offices for young people in order to build capacity for women interested in politics;
- Support funding for women's caucuses in elected bodies
- Change legislation regarding the establishment of political parties and political party funding so that women's parties and feminist political forces can participate in elections at different levels.
- Reform educational programs and educational materials so that non-stereotypical gender roles are promoted among the young including with women in leadership positions
- Sanction sexism as hate-speech, especially sexism expressed during election campaigns.

Recommendations on Priority 5 - Strengthen Accountable, Well-Resourced Domestic Gender Equality Mechanisms

- Urgently re-establish national gender equality mechanisms; without an institutional set up for gender equality progress on women's rights will not move forward; include it as a priority in the next EU Equality between Women and Men Strategy.
- Grant national mechanisms an independent and extended mandate at a high level so that the policy crafted by the mechanisms can incorporate a wide women's rights agenda and is flexible enough to reflect shifting priorities; ensure influence for the mechanism within the executive so that its policies are implemented;
- Provide adequate funding and adequate human resources to make institutions functional;
- Promote European co-operation between different national mechanisms and encourage best practice exchanges
- Introduce clear means of engagement in between national gender equality mechanisms and women's NGOs.

Recommendations on Priority 6 - End Violence Against Women and Ensure Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights for All

- All member states must sign and ratify the CoE Convention on Preventing and Combating violence against women and domestic violence; the EU should also become a party in the convention.
- Issue a new Directive on Violence Against Women; expand the Gender Equality package to include more substantially violence against women; design a VAW corpus and integrate it into the gender equality one; this corpus should include a new directive on violence against women, Directive 2012/29/EU establishing minimum standards and rights for the protection of victims of Violence as well as the European Protection Order Instrument; Ending violence against women must be a key priority in the Equality Between Women and Men Strategy 2015-2020. Violence against women should also be broadened at EU level in order to encompass prostitution as a form of violence.

- The EU is at the forefront of promoting SRHR in international environments; it must do so in its own national contexts; women living in the EU have a right to safe and legal abortion; this is why abortion as a right belongs in the EU equality between women and men agenda;

Recommendations on Priority 7 - End Discrimination Against Roma Population, especially Romani Women; End discrimination based on Migration Status and Act for a Culture Sensitive Inclusion of Migrant Women in all European Societies.

- Deliver on the promises of National Strategies for Roma inclusion – including on women’s social inclusion and political participation.
- Ensure that the fundamental rights of Romani women, men and children are respected and not implement policies such as forced evictions that would further marginalize them; Apply a gender equality perspective to all policies and practice affecting Romani women.
- Ensure that Romani and Traveller women and girls are informed about their rights under existing national legislation on gender equality and anti-discrimination and fully benefit from them.
- Implement equality in civic rights and in access to health services, education, employment and accommodation that respect human rights, non-discrimination and compatible with nomadism in relevant cases.
- Ensure that social inclusion priorities are linked with robust anti-discrimination measures and a zero-tolerance approach to anti-Gypsyism.
- Member states and the EU must sign the UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.
- Ensure that social inclusion programs for migrants have a gender component; design accessible social services for migrant women including free access to health care, to education, to services for VAW victims and labor rights counseling.

Recommendations on Priority 8 Uphold a Peaceful Europe

- Diplomatic talks should include women negotiators and women peacekeepers according to the recommendations of UNSCR1325.
- EU foreign policy needs to stress the value of peace and regional cooperation; should also act more decisively towards ending conflicts in the middle east through multilateral negotiations.
- Grant refugee status and other forms of protection to people fleeing in the face of conflict (especially conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine).
- Direct European aid to conflict zones in the Middle East and Ukraine, especially to refugee camps.
- Recognize violence against women especially sexual violence as a risk to women in conflict zones; recognize sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations as a crime of war and provide adequate legal remedy to victims.