



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S  
**LOBBY**  
EUROPEEN DES FEMMES

Brussels, 4 July 2014

## OPEN LETTER TO NEW COMMISSION PRESIDENT MR. JUNCKER

European Women's Lobby calls on the new Commission President to designate a Commissioner for women's rights and gender equality to achieve gender equality in the next five years

Dear newly designated President of the European Commission,  
Dear Mr Juncker,

The European Women's Lobby (EWL), the largest coalition of women's organisations in the European Union<sup>1</sup>, comprising of members in all EU Member States and three accession countries, would like to congratulate you on your recent nomination as the next President of the European Commission which is the result of the democratic outcome of the European Parliament elections.

Women represent more than half of the European population and yet continue to be under-represented in decision making at all levels. We hope that you will take this reality into due consideration at the beginning and for the duration of your five-year mandate. Indeed, in your response to our [Manifesto](#) published in the run up to the European elections, you committed to take account of gender equality when designing the political programme of the Commission after the European elections.

In order to help you to live up to your promise, we call on you to **designate a Commissioner for women's rights and gender equality**, to ensure that the Treaty obligations (TFEU articles, 2, 3§3, 8, 157) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights (article 23) are fully complied with to guarantee equality of outcome between women and men. Furthermore, we call on you to ensure that the **new College of Commissioners** respects the fundamental values of the EU, both in terms of **gender parity** in the College, and in terms of values shared by all Commissioners, including equality between women and men and women's human rights. Gender equality is a cross-cutting issue that impacts on every area of policy and competence of the European Union.

The European Union has been instrumental in advancing women's rights and gender equality over the past decades: both in Europe and beyond. However, we are now faced with a backlash that is jeopardising the gains that have been made for women's rights and gender equality in Europe. Rising conservative and religious forces and far right political actors are impacting negatively on women's rights and are calling into question the very notion of rights – especially sexual and reproductive rights - that were hard fought for by previous generations of women and men.

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<sup>1</sup> The EWL is the largest umbrella organisation of women's associations in the European Union working to promote women's rights and equality between women and men. EWL membership extends to organisations in all 28 EU member states and three candidate countries, as well as to 21 European-wide bodies, representing a total of more than 2000 organisations



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As a matter of **urgency**, we understand that the Commission is considering **withdrawing** the pending proposal to strengthen **maternity leave** and rights of women who have recently given birth and/or breastfeeding, referred to as the **Maternity Leave Directive**. Let us remind you that this proposal was adopted by a large majority of the European Parliament on 20 October 2010, and in accordance with the procedure, was sent to the Council for its opinion which never materialised. Therefore it was the Member States that refused to enter into the second reading phase. The decision to withdraw this Directive is scandalous as potential and pregnant women workers are being taken hostage but so too are men as the proposed directive also includes provisions on **paternity leave**, as there is **no European directive** on this form of leave.

Such a move is sending a very bad signal to the women of Europe, at a time when women and men's confidence in Europe is low, as they question how the European Union impacts on their daily lives. Contrary to reaching out to all women and men of Europe, women are being singled out in a trade-off of 'good management', which we consider to part of the backlash on women's rights. We did not however expect the Commission, which traditionally has supported women's rights, to take such a stance. In your capacity as the future President of the Commission, we call on you to **reject this proposal** to withdraw the Maternity Leave Directive, **immediately reinstate the proposal** and to give your full commitment to reaching a decision with the Council.

Over and above this particular matter, the current crisis is particularly hitting women hard. **Austerity measures** that result in public sector job losses, wage freezes, reductions and closures in public services, including childcare, elderly and dependent persons care, and health care impact disproportionately on women both as the majority of public sector workers and as the prime users of public services.

Women still earn on average **16% less** than their male counterparts in the EU. Many women in Europe today have no pension and those that do are faced with an average **39% pension gap** in comparison to men which means that women, especially older women, are far more likely to live in **poverty**.

Women's **employment rate lags behind** men's despite the European objective to reach a 75% employment rate for both women and men by 2020. Women are four times more likely to work part time than men. This is primarily for reasons of care responsibilities, due to a large extent to rigid gender roles which should be steered to enable both women and men to become equal carers and equal workers throughout their lives.

Women represent **60% of university graduates** but continue to be confined in low pay jobs and in limited sectors of the economy characterised by poor career prospects, high patterns of part time work, and poor working conditions. Almost one quarter of young women between the ages of 25 and 29 are not in employment, education, nor training (NEETS). Women are still greatly under-represented in **research and innovation**; only 20% of top level academics are women and only one out of ten universities in the European Union has a female Rector.

Women continue to be underrepresented in **decision-making posts** both in political, public and private life. 36.8% women were elected to the European Parliament in 2014, a very slight increase (1.7%) since 2009. However, women's representation in national parliaments is lower at 22% and 26% in national governments.



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According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the single most important factor shaping **migrants experiences is gender**, more important than their country of origin or destination, their age, class, race or culture and therefore, affects many policies not only in the field of migration.

In addition to these figures, the first EU wide survey on **violence against women**, carried out by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) shows **shocking results**: among 42,000 women interviewed, 33% i.e. **ONE in THREE**, experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15 and one in 20 women (5%) has been raped.

The European Commission's 2013 annual report on equality between women and men shows that if policies remain unchanged, it will take **over 100 years** to achieve gender equality in Europe. You have the possibility to make significant steps to reverse this in the coming five years.

Recent trends across the EU show a worrying disengagement of citizens in politics and in the European Project. We believe that if Europe is to reconnect with the citizens it needs to demonstrate clearly the ways in which the EU can make a difference in people's day to day lives: delivering rights, equality and justice for all. We have no doubt that you will agree that the time has come for a more robust political leadership to make equality between women and men a reality now. The women of Europe expect nothing less and will remain vigilant now and over the coming years.

We trust you will give your utmost attention to our call to designate a European Commissioner for women's rights and gender equality to give political leadership to achieve gender equality within the term of your mandate. This is an essential step to guarantee more visibility to the active role of women and their right to be equal to men within a society based on democracy, social justice, human rights and dignity.

Yours sincerely,

Joanna Maycock  
Secretary General  
European Women's Lobby