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Statement submitted by European Women’s Lobby, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The European Women's Lobby (EWL), the largest coalition of women's organisations representing over 2000 organisations, commends the European Union (EU) for achieving parity in the European Commission in 2020, headed by a woman for the first time in the history of the EU. We now expect robust, strong commitments that will place equality between women and men at the heart of women's political leadership across the spectrum of public and political life, both in Europe and worldwide.

2020 also marks an extraordinary year for women, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, who have stepped up in all areas of life. Women's experiences must be recognised as an invaluable asset worldwide for their role in maintaining and sustaining livelihoods. Women are the backbone without whom societies would simply collapse and this must be properly reflected and represented by women in key decision-making roles. As the pandemic continues, women's organisations continue to face 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 side-lines or at risk of serious harm if not given specific consideration in designing the response to and recovery from this unprecedented crisis. This requires women's full and effective leadership in eliminating all inequalities made visible and heightened during the pandemic, and in particular, through the elimination of male violence and the empowerment of all women and girls. Women must not pay the price of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. We call on the leadership of the EU and the United Nations (UN) to seize this opportunity and play a vital role in responding to the pandemic in providing the grounds for the future of the world that is more inclusive of women's needs and vision, and therefore more equal and sustainable for all.

Male violence against women is a long-term systemic issue and a human rights violation that knows no geographical boundaries which threatens the safety and security of women's lives everywhere around the globe. Living free from such violence is a fundamental right that must become a lived reality for all women and girls in the world. Lockdown and isolation measures create an enabling environment for abusers' coercive control of women and lead to more incidents of physical, psychological and sexual violence. Women and girls who are victims of intimate partner violence and sexual violence are confined at home, or in institutional settings, with their abusers, with less possibilities of seeking help without further endangering their lives. Despite the increased danger, women and girls risk having limited access to critical support services and safe shelters during this crisis.

EU Member States and governments throughout the world must ensure that shelters for women and girls who are victims of male violence, for homeless women and for asylum seeking women, remain open with the appropriate measures to protect women and workers in these shelters from the spread of the virus and to provide the appropriate support to women and their children. Urgent funding should be provided to frontline support service providers given the tremendous increase in risk of harm. Common standards for data collection must be established, made consensual, mandatory and be applied across all EU Member States, to ensure that sex-disaggregated data on all forms of male violence against women and girls is made available, particularly to inform emergency responses and plans for redesign and renewal of our systems post COVID-19. It is high time to recognise that the current political responses to violence against women and girls have been insufficient until now and governments' world-wide must multiply the efforts to ensure the commitments made 25 years ago in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action are met.

Women must be at the forefront of all decision-making processes in addressing the full continuum of male violence against women and girls and this must be a major priority for all governments so that they never again leave women and girls in such situations of risk and vulnerability. No woman or girl must be left behind. Comprehensive strategies, action plans and infrastructure must be developed and adequately resourced to effectively prevent and end all forms of male violence against women and girls. This must tackle the continuum of violence and encompass prostitution, sexual exploitation in all its forms and all areas of women's lives impacted by male violence: from the private/family sphere, to the workplace and the public space, including public institutions and online space, which disproportionately targets women in public and political life.

We call on the EU to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, the Istanbul Convention and to adopt a comprehensive EU-wide strategy and an Action Plan on preventing and combating all forms of male violence against women in Europe, including specific legislation. This includes adding violence against women and girls to the list of EU crimes and recognise the need to combat violence against women and girls as a common goal of the EU.

Women's full, effective participation in public and political life, decision-making and leadership is crucial to eliminating male violence against women and girls. Representation and participation of women in all areas of decision-making are necessary to ensure their lived experiences and specific challenges are taken into account. As stated by the United Nations Secretary General on 1st October 2020 at the session of the General Assembly celebrating 25 years of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action: "Achieving [equal representation] will require targeted measures including affirmative action and quotas. This is a human rights issue and a social and economic imperative".

We call on the EU, United Nations and all governments to work on immediate and long-term measures and commitments to achieve concrete positive change. Therefore, we call on them, especially the EU and its Member States, to push for both legislative and non-legislative measures to ensure our public and political representatives actually reflect the potential experiences, skills, interests, needs and visions of the components of humanity and the richness of the world we live in.

Strengthening women's leadership in public and political spheres and all areas of life requires binding measures. It is high time for the EU and its Member States to act strongly and adopt legislative measures to ensure equal representation in all decision-making, including in economic spheres. The underrepresentation of women in economic decision-making has to be addressed within the wider framework of inequalities between women and men. The low rate of representation of women on boards is an expression of the persistent unequal access to economic, social and cultural resources between women and men, and inequalities in the share of paid and unpaid work, including insufficient work-life balance policies for both women and men. We need a paradigm shift and call for a Care Deal to move from the male-breadwinner model to an equal-earner-equal-carer model in which both women and men can effectively partake in equal decision-making in all areas of life.

We call on the EU to move swiftly to adopt the legislative proposal for targets for women on boards of companies quoted on the stock exchange. We call on them to be ambitious and innovative particularly in the forthcoming 'Future of Europe' conference to bring the issue of women's representation in public and political decision-making to the table and move towards the inclusion in EU Treaties of binding measures to ensure equal representation of women and men in all EU institutions.

Such measures would send a positive message and provide girls and young women with positive role models sending a strong message that they can be leaders in all areas of public, economic and other areas of life, empowering them to challenge and dismantle patriarchal structures. Women's leadership worldwide is vital to shifting deep-seated patriarchal structures in which male violence against women is the most acute form of control over women's bodies and lives.

Legally binding measures are necessary by all governments to guarantee equal representation of women in public and political life. Binding targets in the form of mandatory quotas, including on electoral lists, to strengthen women's leadership in full, effective decision-making in public life and beyond is a matter of urgency as we embark on the final decade towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals to achieve real equality between women and men and a better world for all by 2030.
