



PLATAFORMA PORTUGUESA
PARA OS DIREITOS
DAS MULHERES



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
LOBBY
EUROPÉEN DES FEMMES

Mr. Secretary General of the United Nations,
Engineer António Guterres,
Your Excellency,

On behalf of the European Women's Lobby and Soroptimist Europe we are **honored to meet you**. Rita Nogueira Ramos, Vice-President of Soroptimist Europe asked me to convey to you her sincere admiration for your accomplishments as UN Secretary General. As a Soroptimist and as a member of the Portuguese Refugee Council since 1994, she early recognized your courageous work and she is sure, as I am, in my capacity as Vice-President of the European Women's Lobby and President of its national coordination, the Portuguese Platform for Women's Rights, of your support to women's and girl's rights and equality between women and men.

As you certainly know, **the European Women's Lobby is the largest platform of women's organisations in the EU**, comprising of members in all Member States, accession countries and 18 European-wide Associations, including Soroptimist Europe. Together we represent more than 2000 women's organisations and we are delighted to offer you in person our report **"25 years of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995-2020) – THE TIME TO DELIVER IS NOW! The EU at a turning point on the road to achieving equality between women and men"**. I take also the opportunity to inform you that EWL submitted letters of intent to co-lead two action coalitions in the context of Generation Equality: **gender-based violence**, and **economic justice and rights**.

We would like to congratulate you on the speech you delivered on March 8, for its clarity, sense of urgency, and for speaking out about women and men, and for stating very clearly that inequality between women and men and discrimination against women and girls are systemic and inherent to all societies and that equality between women and men is crucial for the future of humanity. Your voice, in this context is extremely relevant, as it is of the utmost importance that the definition provided in Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and in its General Recommendation 28 §22, according to which **gender equality means equality between women and men**, remains the one used by the UN.

Inherent to the principle of equality between men and women, or gender equality, is the concept that all human beings, regardless of sex, are free to develop their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles and prejudices. CEDAW General Rec 28 §22

Specifically, today, we would like to discuss with you three issues:

- The shrinking space of women's civil society including a backslide in UN agreed language as far as sex is concerned with the risk of watering down the work to

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- achieve equality between women and men and rolling back the human rights of women and girls;
- The EU recent five-year Strategy on gender equality (2020-2025);
- The Spotlight Initiative to eliminate violence against women and girls until 2030.
- **Shrinking space of women's civil society**

Women and girls are the **majority of the population**, and **women's organisations** such as ours have been **central to the advancement of the human rights of women and girls** through provision of frontline support, campaigning and advocacy work. Nonetheless, we have seen a **closing down of space for women's organisations**, as seen by the direct **attacks on women's rights**, by the **lack of public funding**, or by the **increasing discourse on 'gender ideology' undermining the progress on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and CEDAW**.

We have been especially concerned by the loss of funding and space for women's organisations providing support or advocacy for example for **survivors of violence and sexual exploitation, for migrant women and girls, for women with disabilities or for homeless women**.

We would like to share our concerns regarding what we see as a **backslide in the use of concepts that are not a part of the agreed UN language with regards to CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA)**. We would like to draw your attention to this particularly as we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the BPfA and the recent commitment by all Member States reaffirming their allegiance to the BPfA, in the Political Declaration adopted on Monday 9 March.

Within the **Generation Equality process**, we were concerned to see for example that the six **Action Coalitions** selected by the Core Group did not reference women and girls in their titles. **We would like assurance that the content and focus of the work of the Action Coalitions will be framed in the language of CEDAW and Beijing and therefore focused on advancing the human rights of women and girls**.

Furthermore we would expect that **women's civil society organisations be included in the leadership of each of the Action Coalitions**, and that their leadership in these coalitions be **properly recognised and resourced**.

Standing up against discrimination on various grounds, and accomplishing equality between women and men under CEDAW are two equally relevant and important but distinct issues. As women's rights organisations, we feel that the increasingly trend of replacing "sex" by a "fluidity of genders", the "rejection of the binary" or the refusal to use the terms women or men, an example of which appears in UN WOMEN's recent campaign: **"Twelve small actions with big impact for Generation Equality" § 3**, is



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damaging. The human rights of women and girls are at risk of being rolled back to a pre-CEDAW era, or even to a pre-Universal Declaration of Human Rights era.

Gender and sex are defined in CEDAW General Recommendation No. 28 §8. We can not accept the replacement of the word sex by the word gender: **The word "sex" is the reference in all non-discrimination clauses**, both in the International Human Rights Protection System, and in the European Regional System (CoE), including in the EU Treaties and EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

We would like to also point out that the **Istanbul Convention defined the concept of gender, while not replacing the concept of sex.**

"gender" shall mean the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men; Istanbul Convention, art. 3

We expect the UN and in particular UN WOMEN to be the guardians of the BPfA and CEDAW by ensuring that the agreed-upon language remains intact. As an entity of the United Nations, we believe that UN WOMEN should not go against **the founding legislation of the United Nations and CEDAW, as well as the International System for the Protection of Human Rights**

We would also like to point out that the use of the term '**sex workers**' is increasingly emerging in UN Agencies' documents (UNAIDS, UNFPA and UNDP), **in disrespect of the UNGA agreed-upon terminology** - "prostitution", "sexual exploitation" and "exploitation of the prostitution of others" - as per the **UN Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others**, and **article 6 of CEDAW**. We believe this undermines the fight against sexual exploitation and denies the human rights of women and girls and of the survivors of the sex trade.

- **The EU Strategy on Gender Equality**

We are happy to report that the EU adopted a five-year strategy on gender equality (Strategy). As you no doubt know, **there has been no progress on advancing equality between women and men in the EU for the past decade**, and there has been no political framework for this work essential to the EU's values. **It is important to see this new strategy setting out some clear political measures on equality between women and men.** We would have liked to see the European Commission's **commitment to women's rights clearly stated in the title** of the Strategy to ensure it is centred on women and girls. We will continue to push for this during its implementation, to ensure that there is no misuse of terminology.



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EWL particularly welcomes the emphasis put in the Strategy on **tackling violence against women and girls, advancing women's rights, leading by example on equal representation of women in decision-making positions**. Commitments in the Strategy to addressing enduring social and economic inequalities regarding pay, pension, poverty, and care gaps have the potential to pave the way towards a **Care Deal for Europe**,¹ one of EWL's key demands. We also welcome the commitment to integrate a gender equality perspective into all major policies including those related to **digitalisation, migration** as well as **the European Green Deal**.

The Strategy makes a clear commitment to the **EU's ratification of the Istanbul Convention** and **we would welcome your support** to ensure this will happen, particularly through your contacts with diplomatic missions from those countries in which ratification has yet to happen.

- **The Spotlight Initiative**

I am **honored to represent the European Women's Lobby in the EU/UN Global Reference Group of the Spotlight Initiative** to eliminate violence against women and girls by 2030, being the only representative of an EU women's organisation. We are expected to close during this month the terms of reference and plan of activities of this Group for the next two years, and we have concerns also in this context on the use of the terminology "sex worker" for the reasons mentioned above.

In this context, we are happy to inform you that we have been actively engaged in the **Spotlight #WithHer digital engagement campaign targeted to the European audiences**, which was launched at an event on March 5 in Brussels. Our contribution was the identification of a **Brussels-based young woman survivor of sexual exploitation which is now one of the survivors portrayed in the Spotlight campaign, drawing attention to the deep individual and societal harms of the system of prostitution**.

Once again, on behalf of the European Women's Lobby and Soroptimist Europe, I would like to thank you most sincerely for meeting us today. You can be assured of the full support of the European Women's Lobby to you as UN Secretary General.

Ana Sofia Fernandes
United Nations Headquarters
11 March 2020

¹ European Women's Lobby (2019), *Purple Pact – A feminist approach to the economy*.

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