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S&D position paper

A progressive gender-sensitive approach to the COVID-19 crisis

The global and European health and economic crisis provoked by the COVID-19 virus reveals the limits and contradictions of our societies and our socio-economic systems and deepens existing inequalities. **As we have witnessed in previous crises women are the most vulnerable, and at the same time vital to maintaining the public life and essential services and recovery. They are affected the most, immediately and for the long-term.**

- **Women are on the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic:** Women are disproportionately represented in professions where exposure to the virus is high, working in hospitals, shops, still opened schools and care homes. **70% of the global health and social workforce like doctors, nurses and care workers are women; shopkeepers, employees and cleaners are in large majority women, often only paid the minimum wage.** It is thanks to these frontline workers for whom physical distancing is often not an option and who thus bear the increased burden of possibly spreading the virus to their relatives, that our economic, social and healthcare systems, our public life and essential activities are maintained. **At the same time, women in these sectors are rarely involved in decision-making, due to the existing glass ceiling.**
- **Women and girls are now even more exposed to gender-based violence:** Figures from several Member States show that the number of cases of violence against women has risen significantly (for example 30% in France) during the lockdown. **For women living in abusive relationships being forced to stay under the same roof as their abuser through isolation measures can be as dangerous as any virus.** Femicides do not count into the official death statistic of COVID-19, but risk to be related to the outbreak and the lockdown measures taken during this period. **Limited access to support services,** like women shelters and hotlines which are currently at risk of being closed down leave women with no place to go and seek help. Further financial restraints after this crisis will make it harder to leave abusive partners.
- **Women risk having restricted access to contraception, (pre-) maternal health care and safe abortion services:** Due to the extraordinary situation in the health systems, and as essential public services and goods become more limited, **women risk losing the fundamental right to health services.** Evidence from past epidemics (including Ebola and Zika) indicate that efforts to contain outbreaks often divert resources from routine health services including pre- and post-natal health

care and contraceptives, and **often exacerbate already limited access to sexual and reproductive health services. We currently have to witness even legal attempts to appeal the right to abortion in one member state.** Especially adolescents need low-threshold access. Furthermore, critical needs include access to **safe delivery**, particularly in the case of complications, availability of **contraception**, and provisions for **clinical management in the case of rape.**

- **Women undertake the majority of unpaid household chores and care work at home, in normal times. As a result of the current crisis and taken measures the unpaid work for women increases:** With schools and nurseries closed, child care at home and home schooling required, elderly relatives needing help with errands, women face an increased emotional, mental and social burden. **Balancing telework and family responsibilities, which should not be a women-only issue, adds additional strain**, in particular for single parents who are mainly women (85%). This could result in worse labor accomplishments comparing to their male peers, a fact that can become crucial once businesses start to “fully” work again. Recovery will not be instant, many jobs will be lost and working hours reduced, as seen in previous crises. **The long term effects of this crisis will most likely again affect women more severely because of a gendered social mandate regarding care work.** In all crises and places, male jobs recovered earlier than female ones.
- **Women will be heavily affected economically, also in the long-term, as history shows:** With threats of an economic downturn looming, disadvantaged groups of women, including inter alia single mothers, migrant women and women with low-income, precarious and part-time jobs will be affected in the long- term by the economic fallout from the crisis, risking poverty, unemployment, social exclusion or homelessness. This has been the case already in the 2008 crisis and we have to make sure that this time, we react differently and timely in order to avoid the worst. There is therefore a legitimate reason for **concern for severe job losses in women-dominated professions** – many women, in addition to already working under precarious conditions, won't be paid if not working and are not entitled to paid sick leave or even unemployment security schemes, further **reinforcing the gender pension gap.**

The disproportionate burden carried by women during and following this pandemic requires a progressive and gender sensitive approach, for both immediate and long-term action, on national and on EU level.

The S&D Group in the European Parliament calls for:

IMMEDIATE GENDER SENSITIVE ACTIONS:

- Ensuring **immediate targeted public investments** to meet the **needs of women health service providers** such as protective gear including sanitary products
- Including the **experience and expertise of all genders in the handling of the crisis**; because where decisions are taken on women's issues, women have to have a voice.
- Ensuring **support and availabilities of helplines**, digital platforms and phone apps, **legal clinics and shelters for women exposed to gender-based violence**, making use of best practice examples (like pharmacy networks, online applications); providing gender sensitive training for health carers as well as frontline police officers and members of the judiciary, and running awareness raising campaigns - through social and traditional networks - about

the risk of increased gender-based violence including information about adequate support services available. Ensuring availability of **emergency funds for civil society organizations, including women's shelters**, supporting victims of violence or assisting women in need of help; ensuring **access to justice and police protection** for women affected

- Guaranteeing **access to quality medical, psychological and social care to all women, including for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)**, such as emergency contraception, abortion, and sanitary products, including flexible solutions with regard to online counselling and online certificates. All **maternity services** must be available and adequately staffed and resourced. All efforts must be directed to **not allowing opponents of SRHR to abuse this crisis as a channel of limiting women's rights**, such as the right to abortion
- Extended rights to **paid leave, teleworking, short time work and improved social protection** for women in precarious employment or who have already lost their jobs; establishing **socio-economic safety nets for women in precarious employment or with precarious contracts**; Protection from eviction and flexible solutions with regards to the postponement of payments for rent, electricity, water etc.
- Providing **support to small and medium-sized women-led businesses** during and after the crisis
- Ensuring access to **free childcare for all types of parents and family constellations working in essential services** and increased support for vulnerable families including those caring for family members with disabilities
- Provide **services for migrant and homeless women**, especially those who are currently being turned away from facilities and increased funds to alleviate the risks to **women in overcrowded refugee camps** and the **sexual violence** they are in some cases exposed to. Ensure the availability of services is free from fear of immigration enforcement;
- Targeted **actions for women with disabilities, and older women** who have limited or no access to ongoing and quality services; and for **women with mental health issues** such as anxiety, loneliness and depression
- Supporting **children's, especially girls' continued access to education**, which can be affected by school closures as seen during previous pandemics;
- **Supporting women and girls throughout the world**, who are also the most affected by the crisis. Ensuring that **all financial support** given to partner countries to cope with the crisis are **properly earmarked for women and girls**, so as to secure access to Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), avoid **child girls' labor** and avoid the lockdowns to lead to a loss of **autonomy for women and girls worldwide**.

LONG TERM GENDER SENSITIVE ACTIONS:

- Applying **gender mainstreaming in all areas of the recovery strategy**, including in the economic strategy is key
- **Levelling up significantly wages and working conditions in strongly female-dominated sectors** like care, health and sales so that women get what they deserve, and not only in times

of the crises; **Sectorial segregation** and the **pay and pension gap** have to be closed by structural binding measures that are not crises related one time primes, and women always need to be a part of the solution for example in scientific research and technological development.

- Enabling a **fairer representation of women in decision making processes** in politics as well as on company boards, by quota, reserved seats, and zip-lists, as this will help to soften the pandemic long-term impacts on women
- Breaking down the **impacts of the crisis** by gender in order to base our health, social and economic recovery policies on quality **gender-segregated data**, as scientific evidence showed a gender differentiated impact during former crises

It is crucial that women are not forgotten - nor dealt with too late in the response to this crisis.

COVID- 19 pandemic increases existing gender inequalities and therefore requires adequate gender-sensitive solutions