



**Ursula von der Leyen**  
**President**  
**European Commission**  
**CC: Commission college**



Brussels, 14 April 2020

Dear President von der Leyen,

First of all, let us express our deepest hope that you and your beloved ones are doing well. As the COVID-19 pandemic is continuing to take its toll on the cost of human lives and is attacking the economic and social foundations of our societies, **it is high time that the impact on the lives of women across Europe and globally is properly recognized and addressed.** We acknowledge the efforts that have been taken so far by the Commission, especially in regards to the social and economic recovery. We also welcome that Commissioner for Equality Helena Dalli has been outspoken about the gender dimension to this crisis. The implementation of the EU Gender Equality Strategy is now more relevant than ever. But still, on behalf of the S&D Group and its working group in Committee for Women's Rights and Gender Equality and the Party of European Socialists as well as its women's organization PES Women, **we are still not seeing enough leadership and action for a gender-sensitive response to this crisis.**

As the first female Commission President you have not only committed to a better representation of women in decision-making, but also to tackling gender inequalities through the work of the entire college. This pandemic has not only revealed the blind spots in our current system, but also deepened existing inequalities between women and men. As we have witnessed many times before, in times of crisis, women are among the most vulnerable, yet at the same time absolutely vital to the recovery process. Overcoming this pandemic and rebuilding a sustainable, just and equal society will only be possible if the role of women in this fight and in general, beyond this crisis, is properly recognized and the disproportionate burden they are carrying are addressed accordingly. It is a unique chance and our common duty as defenders of human rights, justice, equality and democracy **to seize the moment and to use this far-reaching event to finally shift towards a more equal and just society that leaves no one behind. We Socialists and Democrats therefore ask the European Commission to proactively ensure a gender-sensitive response to this crisis.**

In attachment to this letter, we point out why it is crucial that women are not forgotten nor their needs addressed too late in the response to this crisis. We also list which measures are required to adequately implement gender-sensitive solutions, urgently as well as long-term.

We thank you for your attention to this matter of great importance.

Yours sincerely,

Iratxe García Pérez  
President  
S&D Group  
European Parliament

Maria Noichl  
S&D Coordinator  
FEMM Committee  
European Parliament

Zita Gurmai  
President  
PES Women

Sergei Stanishev  
President  
PES



### **Why a gender assessment of the crisis matters:**

**Women are on the front line of the COVID-19 pandemic.** Women are disproportionately represented in professions where exposure to the virus is high. According to the World Health Organization, 70% of the global health and social workforce are women. Women are also overrepresented in at-risk professions like cashiers and cleaning staff. Many of these women are in low-paid, part-time or precarious employment. It is thanks to these front-line workers, for whom physical distancing is not an option, 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 political and economic decision-making.

**Women are now more exposed to gender-based violence.** Figures from several Member States show that the number of cases of violence against women and children has risen significantly during the lockdown. For women in abusive relationships, being forced to stay under the same roof as their abuser can be as dangerous as any virus. Femicides do not count into the official death statistics of COVID-19.

**Women risk having restricted access to contraception, maternal health care and safe abortion services.** Due to the extraordinary pressure on health systems, and since essential public services and goods are more limited, women risk losing their fundamental right to sexual and reproductive health services. Evidence from past epidemics indicates 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.

**Women undertake the majority of unpaid household chores and care work at home.** As a result of the current crisis and necessary lockdown measures, unpaid work done by women increases. With schools and nurseries closed and elderly relatives needing help with errands, women face an increased emotional 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.

**Women will be heavily affected economically, also in the long-term.** With threats of an economic downturn looming, women, especially single mothers, migrant women and women with low-income and precarious jobs will be affected in the long-term by the economic fallout from the crisis, risking poverty, unemployment, social exclusion or homelessness.

### **Immediate as well as long term actions to ensure a gender-sensitive and sustainable recovery:**

- Ensuring immediate targeted public investments to meet the needs of women health service providers, such as protective gear as well as sanitary products;
- Ensuring support for and availability of helplines, platforms, legal clinics and shelters for women exposed to gender-based violence, making use of best practice examples;
- Providing gender sensitive training for first responders such as police and health care staff and running awareness raising campaigns about the risk of increased gender-based violence;
- EU-wide ratification and full implementation of the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence;



- Ensuring availability of emergency funds for civil society organisations, including women's shelters, which support victims of violence or assisting women in need of help. In addition, 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, safe abortion, sanitary products, and maternity services, including flexible solutions with regard to online counselling and online certificates. All efforts must ensure that opponents of SRHR will not be allowed to abuse this crisis as a means to limit women's rights;
- Ensuring 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;
- Ensuring protection from eviction and flexible solutions with regards to the postponement of payments;
- Providing support to small 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 families caring for children 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 many cases exposed to;
- 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;
- Ensuring equal support for all families by making sure that all Member States recognise the legal family status of rainbow families to guarantee their freedom of movement for family reunification, parental rights and access to health care and social services;
- Significantly improving wages and working conditions in strongly female-dominated sectors like care, health and sales and not only in times of crisis; sectorial segregation and the pay and pension gap have to be closed by structural binding measures that are not crises related one time primes;
- Ensuring women's equal involvement in the decision-making and at every stage of the response and recovery plan of this crisis, especially those women working on the front line and who are most affected; enabling a fairer representation of women in decision making processes in politics as well as on company boards, by quota and zip-lists, as this will help to soften the pandemic's 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-disaggregated data;
- Gender-mainstream budgetary measures and increase investments of the MFF to support the care sector and to invest in gender responsive public services;
- Applying gender mainstreaming in all areas of the recovery strategy, including in the short, medium and long-term economic and employment strategy.