



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
LOBBY
EUROPEEN DES FEMMES

European Women's Lobby

Rue Hydraulique, 18
1210 – Brussels (BE)

RE: European Women's Lobby concerns regarding EPSCO Council meeting on 11 December: Maternity Leave Directive, Women on Boards Directive, and Equal Treatment Directive

Your excellency,

We are writing to you from the European Women's Lobby, the largest umbrella organisation of women's associations in the European Union, working to promote women's rights and equality between women and men. We call for your attention regarding the **upcoming EPSCO meeting on 11th December 2014**, particularly focussing on three of the topics on the agenda, namely: **the Maternity Leave Directive, the Women on Boards Directive and the EU Directive on Equal Treatment**. It is in the interest of all European citizens to have a socially and economically sustainable society where all people have equal rights – regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, disabilities, sexual orientation, religion or economic or cultural status. We call upon you and the relevant ministers to take the following arguments into consideration when entering negotiations on Thursday.

Maternity Leave Directive¹

Due to austerity measures (with cuts in public spending) and a lack of provisions such as childcare facilities and other institutional tools, we are witnessing a failure to cope with the current limited maternity leave period. This leads to more women being forced out of the labour market or obliged to work fewer hours, thereby affecting their career opportunities, increasing gender pay gaps and – in the long term – increasing gender pension gaps. It also affects women's abilities to accumulate social protection rights, which leaves women more dependent on the (typically male) breadwinner. The European Union is obligated to promote equal rights and social cohesion for both women and men and the current lack of maternity rights for women in Europe undermines that obligation.

The future of sustainable demographics in Europe depends on maternity rights that create incentives for women and men to have children and to change the pattern of the current "top heavy" population pyramid.

If you are committed to meeting the Europe 2020 target on Employment, a new maternity leave directive with full pay and 20 weeks' leave needs to be put in place without further delay.

Women on Boards Directive²

Following the proposal of women on boards legislation by the Commission in 2012 and its adoption with a vast majority of the votes in the Parliament in 2013, the people of the EU are waiting – ever more impatiently – for

¹ Based on the European Commission's proposal in 2008 to revise the Pregnant Workers Directive, 92/85/EEC

² Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on improving the gender balance among non-executive directorships of companies listed on stock exchanges and related measures (proposed 14 November 2012)

the approval of the Directive relating to women on company boards in the Council. The directive is a further step by the EU to increase the proportion of women in boardrooms for three reasons: Firstly, there is an overwhelming case of justice: parity in decision-making is a basic human right because it is essential that the opinions, needs and wishes of both women and men are taken into account at all levels of decision-making, as the decisions made affect the day-to-day lives of women and men across the EU. Secondly, a wide range of studies have pointed out the strong economic case for increasing the proportion of women on company boards. Finally, self-regulation as a means of achieving parity is simply not effective. Where self-regulation and voluntary targets have been introduced, progress – if there has even been any – has been painfully slow. Concrete and comprehensive measures are necessary in order to bring about real gender equality in decision-making – and we unreservedly call on the Council to approve such measures.

EU Directive on equal treatment³

Six years after the Commission's proposal for new legislation on equal treatment, the Horizontal Directive is still stuck in negotiations at the Member State level, due to strong resistance from a few countries. The Directive is needed as discrimination is still affecting the everyday life and rights of EU citizens. In particular, in spite of efforts at the European level to mainstream gender and diversity, there is a lack of legal remedies on multiple and intersectional discrimination against women. All EU governments must show unanimous leadership on equality and adopt a strong anti-discrimination Directive with a broad scope of application. By stalling its adoption, they maintain existing barriers to accessing goods and services, they prevent EU inhabitants from contributing to Europe's growth as citizens, consumers and volunteers and they create obstacles for businesses and service providers.

Both the Maternity Leave Directive and the Women on Boards Directive have been voted for by the directly and democratically elected European Parliament and these democratic decisions should be respected. In the case of the Directive on equal treatment, the Lisbon Treaty clearly provides the legal basis for this piece of legislation. The Directive is absolutely indispensable to respect the rights enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

We strongly urge you and the ministers concerned to take this into account before going into the negotiations at the EPSCO council meeting. These directives are not only necessary for women's equal rights but also constitute a social and economic investment for an inclusive and progressive Europe. Gender equality in society is good for growth, sustainability and the wellbeing of all human beings.

Viviane Teitelbaum
President of the European Women's Lobby

Joanna Maycock
Secretary General



³ Proposal for a Council Directive of 2 July 2008 on implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation.