



Statement delivered by

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(Check against delivery)

Mr Chair,

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union and its Member States.

The Candidate Countries the Republic of North Macedonia*, Montenegro*, Serbia* and Albania*, the country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidate Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia, align themselves with this statement.

Gender equality can never be taken for granted. Instability, fragility, conflict, climate change, just to mention a few critical issues, and lately the COVID-19 pandemic, are exacerbating gender inequalities and threatening hard-won gains everywhere - within the EU and beyond. Building back better after COVID-19 must serve as a springboard for rethinking the way we have addressed structural inequalities to date and for building more inclusive and gender equal institutions and societies.

In the political arena there has been visible progress. Five years ago, the last country in the world gave women the right to vote, making it a reality everywhere. Currently,

* *The Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.*

more countries have women in leadership and/or a gender balanced government. Yet, women still make up less than 23 percent of parliamentarians globally.

Promoting gender-equal representation in parliament, as well as in governments, is critical. This means removing institutional and structural constraints, discriminatory laws, as well as cultural, organizational and attitudinal barriers and stereotypes. Today, the EU calls for scaling up efforts and collaboration to address systemic discrimination, including multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. Promotion and empowerment of women in parliament and political life is crucial not only for decisions being credible, legitimate and more sustainable. It also fosters gender-responsive legislation and policies in all aspects of governing.

Moreover, gender-equal representation in the corporate sector, particularly in the most senior decision-making positions, is key for the promotion of more diverse and innovative business environments. Breaking the glass ceiling by promoting women in corporate leadership contributes to their empowerment and is crucial for the socio-economic development of societies.

Gender stereotypes coupled with exclusion of women from economic, social and political power and structural inequalities that hinder women's participation in the labour market, including the persistent unequal division of unpaid care and domestic work, create a fertile ground for fear and withdrawal. Removing barriers requires strengthened joint efforts by everyone and by all actors: government, civil society, the media, academia and the private sector alike.

The EU views equal, full, effective and meaningful participation of all women and girls as an unequivocal part of democratic and human rights based governance. It is critical to work towards women's equal, full and effective and meaningful participation, in all their diversity, in all spheres and levels of public and political life. Participation of women and girls with disabilities requires in-depth and more targeted attention and effort. Full participation of all women and girls in public life and political discourse is crucial for adequately translating their perspectives, knowledge and skills into policies to achieve gender equality. To this end, the EU equally underscores the important role of men and boys, and of civil society at large.

Sexual and gender-based violence online and offline continues to be a major barrier for the participation of women and girls in politics and public life. The scale of the problem globally remains alarming: one in three women has experienced physical and/or sexual violence: globally that rises to 35 % of women. The worldwide increase in domestic violence by at least 20% during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a despicable 'shadow pandemic'. We are fully supportive of the Secretary-General's call¹ to end gender-based violence during COVID-19. Three months ago, together with countries from all regions, the EU launched a new 'Group of Friends' at the UN aimed at doing just that. The Group of Friends now counts 91 members.

¹ UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres on Gender-Based Violence and COVID-19 (6 April 2020, reiterated on 25 November 2020). See: <https://youtu.be/SXxnZKom6sg>

Another concrete example of our commitment is the EU-UN Spotlight initiative, the largest investment to date in preventing and eliminating violence. Operating in all regions of the world, focus is on the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence, comprehensive and holistic victim support and empowerment, and the ending of impunity of perpetrators in numerous countries.

In recent years, online gender-based violence, including threats, harassment and cyber bullying, has become one of the key barriers to women and girls' full, equal, effective and meaningful participation. The effects are deplorable and negatively affect the right of women and girls to participate in public life and political decision-making and attempts to bridge the digital gender divide. At the same time, the digital space, including social media tools, enables new forms of participation and activism by young people, which can be a source of positive transformation. The EU underlines that freedom of expression, media freedom, internet freedom and pluralism must be safeguarded as an indispensable element of democracy.

Targeting in politics creates a double burden: women are being attacked both for their profession and as women. Acts or threats of violence can have severe physical or mental health-impacts, lead to self-censorship and to women entirely retreating from their profession or the public sphere, including online platforms. There is no space for complacency. It is about the dignity of every girl and woman, and harnessing their full potential as powerful agents of change. The words of Nelson Mandela are with us: *"For every woman and girl violently attacked, we reduce our humanity"*.

To harness the potential of girls and women, we must respect the choices that each woman and girl makes, we must enable all of them to dare to lead, dare to live. This is essential also for our shared future, for finding solutions to pressing challenges such as climate change, both mitigation and adaptation, and strengthening climate resilience, including through climate-smart technology and solutions that support livelihoods of women. It is essential that women's and girls' voices are raised and heard and that women and girls as well as men and boys are equally part of designing sustainable and gender-responsive interventions and beneficiaries of solutions to tackle national, regional and global challenges.

Strikingly, although women around the globe are at the helm of effective and inclusive COVID-19 response efforts, they are frequently under-represented at the highest levels of decision-making and leadership in sectors that are directly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including in the health sector and in political arenas at local, national and international level. We must address the issue of equal representation for the benefit of future generations.

Mr Chair,

The European Union aspires to be a Union of Equality and a global frontrunner on gender equality.

The EU reaffirms its commitment to the international framework on gender equality, the full enjoyment of all human rights by all women and girls and their empowerment. We have a vision and an ambition: to reach out to the largest number of women and girls and make a real difference in their everyday lives. We wish to ground our support and interventions in strategies that empower all women and girls, at all levels. The EU underlines the role of gender equality in building back better in the post COVID-19 world. Women and girls must be involved in shaping gender-responsive public policies at all levels including in the COVID-19 recovery and rebuilding. If we want to achieve wellbeing and economic growth – we need to invest in women and girls.

Women play a critical role in the prevention and resolution of conflict, as well as in peacebuilding. We must redouble our efforts to fully implement the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

The EU remains committed to the promotion, protection and fulfilment of all human rights and to the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the outcomes of their review conferences and remains committed to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), in this context. Having that in mind, the EU reaffirms its commitment to the promotion, protection and fulfilment of the right of every individual to have full control over, and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality and sexual and reproductive health, free from discrimination, coercion and violence. The EU further stresses the need for universal access to quality and affordable comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information, education, including comprehensive sexuality education, and health-care services.

Last but not least, the EU recognizes the essential role that a vibrant civil society, including, women's rights movements, young people and women activists, plays in advancing women's and girls' leadership, meaningful participation and gender equality. In this regard, the EU highlights the 2021 Generation Equality Forum and supports the efforts by UN Women to foster momentum on meaningful youth engagement and participation for gender equality. The EU condemns legislation that unduly restricts the work of civil society and underlines the need to provide sustainable funding for these actors. The EU also strongly condemns reprisals and violence against women's rights organisations, women human rights defenders as well as women peacebuilders, including those engaging with the UN mechanisms. The EU stands with you. I also wish to thank the dedicated CSO representatives in the EU delegation.

Accelerating the implementation of the commitments I have mentioned is in the interest of the present and future generations. Change in these difficult times requires hard work, unity and determination – as the EU, we are ready to step up action.

I thank you.