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From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Permanent Representatives Committee/Council

Subject: Towards a Europe of Equality
- *Policy Debate*

Delegations will find attached the Presidency steering note on the above subject, with a view to the EPSCO Council on 6 December 2021.

Towards a Europe of Equality

Policy debate

Gender equality and human rights are at the core of European values, and equality between women and men is a fundamental principle of the European Union enshrined in the Treaties and recognised in Article 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) requires the Union, in all its activities, to aim to eliminate inequalities between women and men, and to promote equality. Gender equality and work-life balance are also affirmed in Principles 2 and 9 of the European Pillar of Social Rights proclaimed by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission.¹

However, full gender equality in practice has yet to be achieved, and the COVID-19 pandemic has even exacerbated existing inequalities between women and men in many areas of life. Women in the labour market have been especially hard hit during the pandemic, being overrepresented in the sectors that were the worst affected. For example, women working in essential jobs in hospitals, in care homes and in the retail industry have found themselves on the front line and exposed to the risk of infection. Meanwhile, parents with care responsibilities, among them mostly women, faced unprecedented difficulties as they sought to balance work, family and private life, juggling, for example, between their jobs and the need to support their children in remote learning. The challenges arising from the pandemic are no excuse for backsliding and must not be allowed to erode past achievements. On the contrary, we must push even harder for greater fairness and equality. Like any other crisis, the pandemic is also an opportunity for taking stock, learning lessons and implementing change.

There is a broad consensus in Europe regarding the need to place equality at the very heart of the recovery and our economic future. Both women and men must benefit from the green and digital transitions and enjoy equal opportunities in the evolving labour market. Gender equality also makes economic sense: we cannot afford to waste any talent but must tap the potential of both women and men in order to ensure our competitiveness. Furthermore, to tackle the problem of a shrinking

¹ 17 November 2017

working age population, it is crucial to create the conditions enabling more women to participate in the labour market, which should be resilient and inclusive for all.

The vital importance of gender equality is clearly recognised in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan and its headline targets, which were welcomed in the Porto Declaration.² Of particular relevance is the target whereby at least 78% of the population aged 20 to 64 should be in employment by 2030. As the Action Plan states, in order to reach this overall goal, Europe must strive to at least halve the gender employment gap compared to 2019. The policy measures relevant to this aspiration include narrowing the gender pay gap, reducing segregation in the labour market and improving the availability of early childhood care and long-term care.

It is also vital that gender mainstreaming is applied across the EU funds and instruments. With this in mind, the new Recovery and Resilience Facility requires the Member States to explain how their national recovery plans will contribute to promoting gender equality, thus helping to ensure a gender-responsive and genuinely inclusive recovery in the EU.

Against this background, Ministers are invited to address the following questions:

- 1) *What policies and measures are needed to address the existing gender gaps (e.g. the employment gap, the pay gap, and the digital gap), so as to ensure a real equality between men and women in the labour market? Which work life balance measures could be the most relevant in this respect?*
- 2) *What new initiatives, if any, are needed at the EU level to support Member States in their efforts to promote equality between women and men in the labour market?*
- 3) *How can we ensure that the gender perspective is better and more systematically integrated into future EU strategies and policies?*

² 8 May 2021