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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject:	The future gender equality policies and gender mainstreaming in the EU Policy debate

Delegations will find attached a guidance note prepared by the Presidency, with a view to facilitating the discussion in the EPSCO Council on 10 December 2019.

Future Gender Equality Policies and Gender Mainstreaming in the European Union

1. Context and challenges

There have been some important achievements in gender equality in the EU, such as the increased gender balance in decision-making, the adoption of the Work-Life Balance Directive and the strengthening of gender mainstreaming in the EU's external action. However, as analysed in the Beijing +25 report¹ by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), some old challenges in terms of gender equality remain, including gender gaps in employment, pay, pensions and poverty levels, as well as gender-based violence. New challenges are emerging, for example from digitalisation, migration and climate change. The EIGE's 2019 Index shows that with a score of 67.4, the EU is still far from achieving gender equality.

With regard to gender mainstreaming, the Beijing+25 report concludes that the integration of a gender perspective in different areas of EU policy is fragmented and lacks continuity. Mainstreaming tools, such as gender impact assessments, are used infrequently in EU policy-making.

As regards gender mainstreaming in economic and budgetary policies, the lack of gender specific targets and shortcomings in the implementation have stalled progress. Some EU funds have gender-specific and/or mainstreaming objectives, but they often fail to follow them up in practice with implementation measures, as is the case with the European Structural and Investment Funds. There have been efforts to integrate gender equality in the implementation of the European Semester, for example through the Joint Employment Reports and the use of sex-disaggregated data. However, the link between macroeconomic and gender equality elements is weak and the gender impacts of policy recommendations are not usually assessed. The difficulty of tracking spending on gender equality makes it difficult to develop gender-sensitive budgeting in the EU.

¹ The review on implementation of the UN Beijing Platform for Action, 25 years after its adoption.

Equality between women and men is one of the founding values and fundamental principles of the European Union, as stated in the Treaty on European Union and in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) gives the Union the task of eliminating inequalities and promoting equality between women and men through all its activities.

The EU has committed itself politically to a dual approach towards realising gender equality, comprising both the integration of a gender perspective in all policies, and specific measures to promote gender equality and combat discrimination. Gender mainstreaming is a key transformative strategy to support the realisation of gender equality. Examples of gender mainstreaming in EU policies include the Gender Action Plan II (2016-2020) in EU external actions and the strong gender perspective in the EU's Research and Innovation policy framework.

Research has identified the key elements for successful gender mainstreaming. First, there needs to be a strong political commitment to gender mainstreaming. Then it is also necessary to ensure adequate institutional structures and procedures for gender mainstreaming, and to reinforce its actual implementation across the policy areas, including through knowledge-based monitoring and evaluation and the use of existing tools, such as gender impact assessments.

2. Promoting equality and gender mainstreaming in the EU: ways forward

Finland's Presidency will hold a policy debate on the priorities and directions for EU gender equality policies, including gender mainstreaming, at the EPSCO meeting on 10 December. The aim is to explore ways of strengthening the political commitment to, and specific measures for combating gender inequalities and ensuring real progress towards gender equality.

Finland's Presidency held a High Level Conference “Europe for Gender Equality? Taking Stock – Taking Action” on 30 September and 1 October 2019 in Helsinki, with a focus on future EU gender equality policies and gender mainstreaming in economic and budgetary policies. The participants emphasized the need for a strong EU gender equality strategy. Gender impact assessments and gender budgeting were seen as important tools for integrating gender equality into economic decision-making and taking gender issues seriously into account in the economic policy agenda. It was stressed that the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as the use of gender equality indicators in the context of the European Semester, offer new possibilities for gender mainstreaming. Cooperation between gender equality and budget sectors was seen as essential for developing gender budgeting.

The beginning of the new Commission's term of office and the strong gender equality commitments made by the President-elect Ursula von der Leyen, including the gender equality strategy, provide a good basis for strengthening gender equality policies and gender mainstreaming in the EU. The President-elect has also stated her intention to refocus the European Semester into an instrument that integrates the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which include SDG5 on gender equality.

Against this backdrop, ministers are invited to answer the following questions:

1. What should be the thematic priorities of EU gender equality policies in the next five years?
2. Which actions and measures should the EU take to combat gender inequalities and strengthen gender equality policies in the next five years?
3. How can we ensure that gender equality is more strongly integrated into key future EU strategies and policy processes, including economic and budgetary policies? What are the structures, means and forms of cooperation for doing this, including in the Council?