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Written statement* submitted by

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The 10th

FOLLOW-UP OF THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Legal framework

civil society. The Commission has now proposed a new Programme called PROGRESS which will continue to address the promotion of equality between women and men.

PROGRESS SO FAR

In the past decade positive developments towards equality between women and men are evident in the EU. Economic growth and general progress in society have made these developments possible. Changes have not happened automatically, but as a result of strategic policy initiatives to promote equality between women and men at EU and national level.

These have also been the result of the integrated approach we have towards gender equality, namely the combination of legislation, gender mainstreaming and specific measures, including financial instruments.

The so-called Open Method of Coordination – a unique experience we have in the European Union - has had a catalytic effect for the promotion of gender equality. It has brought together countries with different backgrounds and different starting points, stimulating them to achieve gender equality objectives and goals set at European level. Another important aspect of our policies is the partnership approach not only between the Member States and the Commission but also with the social partners. Their contribution for the achievement of gender equality is vital.

There have been major changes in education enrolment in Europe. Women now outnumber men in upper secondary and tertiary education in most Member States and they represent the majority of graduates in the European Union: 58 % in 2003. Women now also represent 41 % of PhD graduates.

These changes have been translated, although not completely, onto the labour market. Women's employment rates have increased more than men's, standing now at 55.1% in 2004, compared to less than 50% in the first half of

The provision of adequate care facilities remains the fundamental instrument for allowing women to enter and remain in the labour market throughout their lives. We need to boost the provision of affordable, accessible childcare facilities of good quality, in particular for children aged 0-3, in line with the Barcelona targets. But in the context of the ageing population, urgent actions and commitments are needed also to guarantee a suitable level of care provision for dependants other than children, in order to avoid the withdrawal of workers, in particular women, from the labour market.

It will also be important that Member States promote adequate parental leave schemes, shared by both parents. It is particularly important to facilitate men's opportunities to take up leave by developing financial and other incentives.

It is of the outmost importance to promote flexible work arrangements with a view to facilitate reconciliation of professional and private life for both men and women. Special attention should be paid to actions directed towards men in order to promote a change of workplace culture in support of gender equality. In all these actions the role of the social partners will be fundamental.

To meet the challenge of an ageing society, Europe needs to mobilise people to enter the labour market and to create policies to further promote women's employment in all age brackets but in particular in the older ages, and to fully utilise the female employment potential among immigrants. Increasing women's labour market participation, which will not only strengthen the financial sustainability of pension systems, but also allow women to become economically independent and earn better pensions of their own.

HOW CAN THE EUROPEAN UNION BE AN EFFECTIVE PARTNER IN THE PROMOTION OF GENDER EQUALITY AT GLOBAL LEVEL?

The European Union is an active partner in the global effort to promote gender equality. The EU is committed to ensuring that economic and social progress go hand in hand in its internal and external policies.

The EU is working in the western Balkans and with its new neighbours - in Northern Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe - to support countries to move closer to EU standards, including equality between women and men.

The achievement of gender equality is a precondition for eradicating poverty. Over the last ten years we have seen significant progress in the social, economic and political status of women in developing countries. There has been an increase in the enrolment of girls in primary and secondary education and in the quality of health care for women. The female labour force has grown in almost all the regions of the world.

The countries where positive changes have taken place are characterised by strong political commitment towards increasing women's involvement in decision-making. Women parliamentarians have had significant impact in some critical areas: raising violence against women as a political issue; enhancing women's awareness of their existing rights through civic education;

