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**We need to walk together on this long road towards gender equality**

**The conference on *Women in the Labour Market* organised by the EESC to mark International Women's Day, was held on 8 March under the shadow of the wa**r. **The participants paid tribute to the remarkable Ukrainian women for their strength, bravery and resilience.** **Attention was drawn** **to different aspects of gender equality such as the need to increase women's participation in the labour market, especially with regard to new digital and green jobs, to facilitate female entrepreneurship, to improve care services and work-life balance, and to tackle gender stereotypes and work-related harassment.**

In her opening address, EESC president **Christa Schweng** referred to the Ukrainian women and girls, who are being forced to leave their country, putting them at heightened risk of violence.

In the same vein, the president of the Ad Hoc Group on Equality and EESC member, **Maria Nikolopoulou,** highlighted: "*Women, mothers, spouses are stuck in a war zone, many of them are becoming soldiers themselves, others are trying to escape from the atrocities of the attacks. Our thoughts and solidarity today go to all women who are suffering the devastating effects of war. We join our voices with the civil societies that demand an end to the war, in all countries".*

The participants agreed that 8 March is not a day to celebrate women's empowerment but a day to restate the principle of equality and to put forward legislation and measures to combat violence against women and remove biases in pay structures and work opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further widened the gender employment gap and it has also contributed to a surge in violence and harassment at work. *"Preventing and addressing this is a must, if we want to attract and retain more women in the labour market and enhance their financial autonomy"*, said **Manuela Tomei**, Director of Conditions of Work and Equality Department at the International Labour Organisation (ILO). She urged all Member States to ratify the 190 ILO Convention against violence and harassment, stressing that "the ratification of the 190 ILO convention needs acceleration".

Commissioner for Equality, **Helena Dalli**, announced that the European Commission would present a proposal for a directive on combatting violence against women and domestic violence. It will be binding for all Member States. Ms Dalli highlighted that *"women cannot fully participate in all aspects of life, if they do not live a life free from violence*".

When it comes to gender stereotypes, it is like *"going back to basics and to a certain extent back to the future"* as Mary Collins from the European Women's Lobby puts it. Ms Collins mentioned the major lack of gender mainstreaming in the EU Green Deal and digital agenda, where, she pointed out, "women are completely forgotten".

Ms Schweng also underlined that *"more women should be present in the growing sectors, like those related to STEM and new technologies, which offer rewarding and highly paid careers"*.

Regarding the artificial intelligence sector, women make up only 16% of the workforce, which leaves the 84% of men to take all the decisions and lead. *"If women are absent from these sectors, this means our whole new world will be fashioned by men, with their possible bias",* said Ms Schweng.

**Marta Junqué Surià**, fromtheBarcelona Time Use Initiative for a Healthy Society, analysed the importance of promoting an effective work-life balance, stressing that time policies can contribute to generating an effective work-life balance and a healthier, more equalitarian and more efficient society.

To this end, **Robert Biedroń,** chair of the European Parliament Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality, highlighted that *"EU Member States need to fully implement and go beyond the Barcelona targets, so that women do not have to choose between family and participation in the labour market"*.

In terms of female entrepreneurship, the situation is improving and numbers show that the percentage of women entrepreneurs or self-employed women has grown from 28% in 2012 to 34% nowadays. But still women have higher mountains to climb in their working lives.

**Srita Heide**, Special Representative on Diversity, Human Resources and Business showcased that according to a survey conducted by the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), if women and men around the world participated equally as entrepreneurs, global GDP could ultimately rise by approximately 3%, to 6%, boosting the global economy by $2.5 trillion to $5 trillion. *"Therefore, reducing the gender gap means: economic growth".*