Women's rights in the Balkan accession countries

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The Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality adopted the own-initiative report by Marije CORNELISSEN (Greens/EFA, NL) on women's rights in the Balkan accession countries. It stresses the need for women in the Western Balkans to take a prominent role in society through active participation and representation at all levels of government and in political, economic and social life. Whilst the accession countries in the Western Balkans have adopted much of the legislation required in the EU accession process, Members note that this legislation is in many cases not being effectively implemented. They call on the Commission to make the implementation of women's rights, the mainstreaming of gender equality and the continuous fight against domestic violence a priority in the accession process of Western Balkan countries, by continuing to address these issues and to report on their implementation in progress reports.

The committee notes with concern that women are under-represented in economic and political decision making, that women's employment rates in the Western Balkan countries remain very low, that women entrepreneurs are frequently discriminated against when trying to secure loans or credit for their businesses.

Members recommend that Western Balkans governments:

- introduce quotas so to promote female representation, and, where necessary, to apply quotas effectively in political parties and national assemblies;

- introduce measures in order to reduce the gender pay gap and, consequently, the gender pension gap and to tackle high unemployment rates, focusing in particular on women, especially those in rural areas;

- establish a legal framework for equal pay for equal work for both sexes, to assist women in reconciling private and professional life, to secure better working conditions, lifelong learning, flexible work schedules and in addition to create an environment which stimulates female entrepreneurship;

- accompany measures and action plans with adequate resources for their implementation, including appropriate women personnel;

- use the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) for projects related to the promotion of women's rights and gender equality;

- develop specific strategies to improve the position of women faced with multiple discrimination, such as Roma women, lesbian, bisexual or transgender women, women with disabilities, women of ethnic minorities and older women.

The report goes onto note with deep concern that **30 % of the victims of cross-border trafficking in human beings in the EU are nationals of Balkan countries**, and women and girls comprise the bulk of the victims detected. It calls on national authorities in the region to work together in creating a common front, and to provide sustained funding to combat trafficking.

Members consider that **women play an essential role in stabilisation and conflict resolution**, which is crucial to reconciliation in the region as a whole, and they welcome the efforts of networks such as the Regional Women's Lobby to support women in peace-building and to promote access to justice for women in post-conflict countries.

Members underline generally the **importance of awareness-raising campaigns** in the fight against stereotypes, discrimination (gender-based, cultural, religion-based) and domestic violence. They call on the Commission and the governments of accession countries to foster awareness through the media, public campaigns and education programmes in order to eliminate gender stereotypes and promote female role models and women's active participation in all paths of life including decision making.

The **EU delegations in the Balkan countries** are asked to keep progress in the sphere of women's rights and gender equality under careful review in anticipation of future accession to the EU. Each delegation is asked to appoint a member of staff to deal with gender policies with a view to facilitating the exchange of good practice within the Balkan region.

The report then focuses individually on the seven countries in the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Montenegro and Serbia – which are at different stages of the process to become Member States of the European Union and formulates recommendations to address the gender equality issues in each country.