External factors that represent hurdles to European female entrepreneurship

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The Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality adopted the own-initiative report by Barbara MATERA (EPP, IT) on external factors that represent hurdles to European female entrepreneurship.

Members recalled that women only accounted for 31 % of entrepreneurs (10.3 million) in the EU-28 in 2012, and only 34.4% of the self-employed in the EU are women. Women are often only the officially registered owners of firms, for the sole purpose of securing financial concessions and advantageous conditions from credit institutions and European, national and regional public administrations.

They noted in particular that the obstacles to female entrepreneurship are:

- the predominance of women in unemployment,
- the consistent gap in entrepreneurial activity,
- the under-representation of women in management activities.

In this regard, Members called on Member States and regions to put forward **concrete strategies to promote a culture of female entrepreneurship**, as well as different management and leadership styles and new ways of organising and managing companies.

Whilst stressing the need for gender-disaggregated data, including on various female entrepreneurship fields, Members called on the Commission to incorporate the issue of women's entrepreneurship into its post-2015 strategy on equality between women and men.

Members called for a **holistic approach to female entrepreneurship**, aimed at encouraging and supporting women in building a career in entrepreneurship.

Work-life balance: Members called on the Commission and the Member States to recognise the value of entrepreneurship for the work-life balance of women and men, to **eliminate barriers that hinder or even prevent female entrepreneurship**, and to adopt a coherent framework of measures to support female labour market participation.

In the aftermath of the decision to withdraw the proposal to amend the Maternity Leave Directive and in order to safeguard progress on equality policies at EU level, Members encouraged a constructive dialogue among institutions to see how best to support and **implement work-life balance policies** as well as concrete steps, including legislative proposals, for increasing the participation of women in the labour market through measures to improve work-life balance.

The Commission and the Member States are called upon to:

- implement the appropriate legislative and non-legislative actions on work-life balance;
- establish policies enabling effective reconciliation of family- and work-related responsibilities.

Information and networks: Members emphasised the great importance of public spaces in helping to develop projects (providing visibility and acting as incubators for companies) and providing financial and tax-related support, relevant and up-to-date information, and advice on starting up a business, in particular for new female entrepreneurs.

They stressed the importance of funds for business consolidation. In this regard, Members considered that European networks of women entrepreneurs should create a European and national network to facilitate and assist women in seeking financing and advice services for ease of access.

The Commission is called upon to emphasise the use of forums in its upcoming European ePlatform for Women Entrepreneurship, and to include a step-by-step plan for accessing European funding possibilities. It should also establish, with no impact on the Commission budget and in the framework of the existing structure, a **European Business Centre for women**, in close cooperation with Member States and companies from the private sector.

Access to funding: Members called on Member States' governments, authorities and equality bodies (where they exist) to collaborate with the financial sector regarding their obligation to ensure equality between men and women in access to capital for freelancers and SMEs.

They suggested to the Commission the introduction of **gender quotas in all forms of targeted support provided to under-represented and disadvantaged groups**, in order to ensure progress towards achieving parity in entrepreneurship.

The Commission and the Member States should enhance the visibility of financing for entrepreneurial activity by **drawing up aid maps for microfinance**, among other measures, under the European Progress Microfinance Facility.

Members also urged the Commission to address the specific challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in its next review and update of the Small Business Act (SBA). They also called for greater monitoring to avoid the phenomenon of women being used by men as 'fronts' in order to secure financing on easier terms.

Entrepreneurial education and training: Members highlighted the importance of education at all levels, both formal and informal and including lifelong learning, for boosting entrepreneurship and new business development, including in ICT, and especially in subject areas mostly studied by girls, such as healthcare and other services. They called on the Member States to collaborate with the public sector, the private sector, NGOs, universities and schools in order to establish more apprenticeships and non-formal and informal learning programmes and suggested training in new information and communications technologies, social networks, online commerce, networking.

Members also noted with concern that women often underrate their skills, probably as a result of stereotypes and stressed that there is thus a need for motivational and psychological support programmes to boost the self-confidence of female entrepreneurs.

Social entrepreneurship: lastly, Members stressed that alternative business models such as cooperatives and mutuals play an important role in promoting gender equality and advancing sustainable and inclusive development and growth. They called on the Commission and the Member States to facilitate and **promote such alternative models**.