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**Statement delivered by**

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**(Check against delivery)**



Madam Chair,

I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union and its Member States.

The Acceding Country Croatia\*, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia\*, Montenegro\* the Countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, as well as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia align themselves with this declaration.

Madam Chair,

I am honoured to address this Commission, which annually brings together thousands of women and women's organisations and has played a visible role in advancement of women, including taking on new and previously unaddressed topics. We firmly believe that we need to continue working constantly for the implementation of all international instruments and commitments on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Gender equality is a fundamental right enshrined in the EU Treaty and guaranteed by the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, a common value and one of EU's objectives and tasks, and mainstreaming equality between women and men in all its activities constitutes one of our specific missions. A large body of European legislative texts dedicated to equality between women and men over the life course covers, amongst others, equal access to employment, equal pay, maternity protection and parental leave, equal participation in decision making positions, equal economic independence and ending gender based violence. In 2010 the European Commission adopted the Strategy for Equality between Women and Men for 2010-2015 to enhance its action in the field of gender equality. Besides, in March 2011, the Council of the European Union adopted the European Pact for Gender Equality 2011-2020, reaffirming the EU commitments in this area.

In addition to the focus on promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women within the EU, its Plan of Action on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Development for 2010-2015 helps guide the EU's external action over the coming years. This Plan of Action forms part of the EU strategy to accelerate the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, particularly MDG3 and MDG 5, as well as to achieve the full implementation of the CEDAW convention, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the Cairo Programme of Action. It establishes a basis for the systematic inclusion of gender equality in the EU's political dialogues with partner countries and for the involvement of civil society, particularly women's organisations, both in partner countries and in the EU. It also contains actions to increase technical capacity for gender mainstreaming.

Madam Chair,

Women have the right to be equal members of society and part of their countries future. Furthermore, the future and success of their countries is dependent on ensuring

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\* Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Montenegro continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process



their equal role and right to participate in the political and economic decision-making and social, civil and cultural life.

Over 15 years ago, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action committed States to remove all obstacles to women's full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society. This is fundamental for the achievement of gender equality, development, stability and peace, and essential for the achievement of transparent, effective and accountable government.

The transformations over the last year have seen women taking leading roles – as politicians, human rights defenders, political organisers, lawyers, doctors, bloggers, journalists, among others – supplying valuable skills and information needed to bring about positive change. These popular movements reaffirmed the universal yearning for freedom from fear and repression, and women from all backgrounds and cultures participated prominently.

Gender does not matter when striving for political change, nor should it be an excluding factor in the political processes that follow. The European Union calls for ensuring the rights of women in constitutional reforms and for their equal and full participation in the political processes and the new political structures in countries that recently have gone through a political transition process. We stand ready to support women's participation in political and social processes, including by sharing experience on all measures to increase women's political participation.

In a joint statement issued last September in New York, the high-level representatives of Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago and the United States together with the EU reaffirmed that women's political participation is fundamental to democracy and essential to the achievement of sustainable development and peace.

Madam Chair,

We welcome this year focus on the empowerment of rural women: we would like to point out two main reasons for this:

First and foremost: women's rights and gender equality are fundamental rights. And yet gender inequality and discrimination against women still persists around the world. Rural women, due to the prevalence of certain conditions in rural areas, are particularly disadvantaged and suffering from multiple discrimination throughout the life cycle because of their gender and because they live in remote and often very poor areas. Thus, policies must address that diversity in order to ensure their equal enjoyment of human rights. In particular, special policies must be addressed in order to eliminate the multiple discrimination against women and girls with disabilities living in rural areas, which account for 70% of women and girls with disabilities.

Secondly: gender equality is vital to economic and social cohesion and sustainable economic growth. Mobilising the full productive potential of women is essential to achieve economic and sustainable growth to fight poverty and hunger. This is even more the case for rural women as in many countries women are the backbone of local and national food and nutrition security and a critical force in promoting development. Empowering women in rural development has been shown to increase production and productivity, raise household incomes, ensure food and nutrition



security for their families, facilitate successful adaptation to impacts of climate change and ensure significant improvements to child health and educational levels, thus contributing to the achievement of all the MDGs.

Here I would like to draw your attention to the ongoing negotiations of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests at the UN Committee on Food Security (CFS) in Rome. The Voluntary Guidelines will provide guidance to improve the governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests with the overarching goal of achieving food security for all. These Guidelines explicitly call for the provision of equal tenure rights and access to land, fisheries and forests for women and girls. From the beginning, the EU has been a strong supporter of the elaboration and negotiation of the Guidelines.

Gender equality is strongly incorporated into the EU rural development legislation in line with the EU Treaty's obligation to promote equality between women and men in all EU activities.

All women in the Member States of the EU, including rural women have the same rights as men, including the right to own and to inherit property, land, financial assets as well as the right to health education, and to participate on equal footing with men in the socio-economic and political life.

In the EU, rural women play an important role in the agriculture and fishery sectors. And yet, their work is not fully recognized and remains often unpaid and invisible. Many women do not own the company they are working at and mainly assist their partners/spouses in the family enterprise, with a negative impact on their employment status and their social protection coverage.

In 2010 the EU has tackled this situation by adopting a new directive (2010/41/EU) on the application of the principle of equal treatment between men and women engaged in an activity in self-employed capacity. The directive ensures a higher level of social protection to assisting spouses/partners thus benefiting in particular women working in the agricultural but also in the fishery sectors.

Madam Chair,

Guaranteeing equal rights to women and men and women's full the jure and the facto equality is a necessary condition for sustainable development and for the eradication of poverty and hunger. In far too many places across the world women have weaker property rights and tenure security than men, or no rights at all with severe consequences, not least in terms of impossibility to benefit from land entitlements schemes or to have access to credit.

Madam Chair,

Governments must act to change these restrictive practices so that communities can flourish and poverty and hunger is eradicated. Worldwide, while significant gains have been made in enrolment, we are concerned that many countries will not achieve MDG2 or MDG3 by 2015, let alone the broader Education for all (EFA) goals. Girls from rural areas are particularly disadvantaged, as they have the lowest levels of literacy and education. In the Member States of the EU, access to education, an



integral component of the empowerment of women, has been assured: women have attained high levels of education and currently even outnumber men in tertiary education.

Our aim must be to expire to such improvements elsewhere, starting with actively promoting gender equality at all levels of education by helping partner countries ensure that their education systems have adequate gender-disaggregated information on student participation at all educational levels and participation on all management levels; improved learning achievement; and effective targeted programmes to address equal access of women to all levels of education eliminating gender stereotypes in education, in vocational training and in careers choices as a vital step towards tackling the gender inequalities.

Madam Chair,

To guarantee the future development in rural areas, it is essential to put in place infrastructure and services equivalent to those in urban areas needed to make sure the full enjoyment of human rights. This is crucial to overcome the issue of isolation and its negative consequences on rural society and in particular on women.

The creation of quality employment opportunities in rural areas is essential to prevent wide scale migration to urban areas and to ensure the economic independence of rural dwellers, including the female population. The development of entrepreneurial activities, such as food production and tourism can afford economic opportunities to women and supplement agricultural incomes. The availability of functioning infrastructure and of technology services such as broadband access is crucial to economic activity.

The provision of quality, affordable and accessible childcare facilities and care services for other dependants, as well as facilitating the reconciliation of work and family life of both women and men on a equal footing, are of crucial importance to ensure women's economic independence. The provision of these services is part of the Europe 2020 strategy for growth. We also would like to underline the importance of increasing the participation of men in care giving, both within households and in care professions.

Access to services like family planning, pregnancy and birth is a particular challenge in order to guarantee reproductive health and well-being of women and girls living in rural areas. They often have to walk or be transported many miles to get basic resources like clean water, food or energy; or to reach a health clinic or to get information or qualified assistance qualified assistance giving birth. This is one reason why maternal mortality remains unacceptably high in a number of countries, including many Sub-Saharan countries. We must change this by stepping up efforts to realise MDG5 and other MDGs.

We are convinced that, as stated in the Beijing Declaration, the explicit recognition and reaffirmation of the right of all women to control all aspects of their health, in particular their own fertility is basic to their empowerment.

Measures such as comprehensive sexuality education, outlawing early and forced marriage and preventing teenage pregnancies or combating harmful traditional



practices reduce maternal mortality and have huge development dividends in terms of family health, educational levels, people's ability to lift themselves out of poverty, and positive effects on economic growth at family, community and national levels.

In order to meet the MDG's and remaining committed to the full implementation of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)/Cairo Declaration and Programme of Action and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the EU will pay special attention to gender equality and the rights of women and men to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexual and reproductive health. To this end, we will work actively to ensure that health systems provide information and health services addressing the sexual and reproductive needs of women and family planning, as this is crucial for women's rights, gender equality and women's empowerment and subsequently benefits society as a whole.

Madam Chair,

There is no doubt that employment and the possibility to engage in paid work is a crucial condition for women's empowerment, women's economic independence and the realisation of gender equality. This is the basis of gender equality policies in the EU and this is confirmed in the current European Commission's Strategy for equality between women and men.

Worldwide, reduction of rural poverty and hunger depends on improving access of women to decent work and income generating opportunities, particularly through ensuring their access to productive assets, including land, credit technology and developing their skills and human capital.

Facilitating women's full enjoyment of their rights, opportunities and participation and leadership in society requires comprehensive and gender-sensitive policies and action.

Madame Chair,

Ultimately, it is critical to women's employment that violence against women and girls is eliminated. Traditional attitudes regarding the subordinate role of women, poverty and lack of opportunities in rural areas represent root causes of violence against women, trafficking in women, sexual exploitation and forced labour.

The EU and its MS will continue to implement the EU Guidelines on Violence against women and girls and all forms of discrimination against them. They are the backbone of EU action in this field and have been concretised by the development of specific reports and action points for more than 130 countries.

Similarly, the EU reiterates its appreciation and support for the work of Ms Rashida Manjoo, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences. Under the EU action plan for justice policies 2010-2014, the EU provides help for the protection of victims of crime, including women victims of violence and female genital mutilation as well as financial support to civil society, universities and local authorities, to combat violence against women and support victims.



The EU has consistently called for the full implementation of the women, peace and security agenda set in UN Security Council resolutions 1325 (2000) and the subsequent resolutions on women, peace and security. As we have repeatedly emphasized, women's participation in all stages of the peace processes is a prerequisite for sustainable stability and therefore has to be ensured.

The first EU report on the indicators on the implementation of UNSCR 1325 was finalized in May 2011 with encouraging results. The EU is active on this issue in more than 70 countries. Its support amounts to about 200 million Euros a year for the development and implementation of national action plans, support for non-governmental organisations, and training for governmental agencies.

The EU and its Member States are strongly committed to enhancing the consideration of gender aspects in the early planning of our missions and operations, during their conduct, and in the lessons learned processes. In November 2010, the EU adopted the first report on the lessons learned and best practices of mainstreaming human rights and gender equality into the military and civilian missions under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). All these missions and operations now include human rights and/or gender expertise.

The European Union supports the work of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Ms Margot Wallström and the Team of Experts on Rule of Law to implement the UNSC resolutions 1820, 1888 and 1960. The EU supports actions aimed at ending impunity for sexual violence in conflict and providing an integrated approach to prevent and punish acts of sexual violence, as well as to bring justice, services and reparation to its victims.

We remain committed to the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, inter alia through the work of the European Institute for Gender Equality and will work with reinvigorated efforts in cooperation with global partners. We are disappointed that 17 years on there has not been more progress and we will work with reinvigorated efforts in cooperation with global partners. The EU wants to express its strong support and gratitude to Madame Michelle Bachelet, Executive Director of UN Women, for her tireless work and advocacy to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. We are reinforcing our cooperation with UN Women through a specific partnership agreement that we are in the process of establishing.

Madam Chair,

The EU will, along with its partners, continue to work for the goal to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and the effective implementation of equal rights of women and men, and remains committed to actively participate in the work of this Commission.

Thank you, Madam Chair.