

Statement by the National Council of German Women's Organizations to the 59th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (New York, 9 to 20 March 2015) on the Review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

In 2015 the international community will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the 4th World Conference on Women and the Beijing Platform for Action, a fundamental human rights instrument for women and girls adopted in 1995. This is an excellent opportunity to assess the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, to take stock of progress, look at remaining challenges and highlight opportunities for the way of women's empowerment and equality.

By assessing the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, the National Council of German Women's Organisations states that the last 20 years have brought substantial progress for the empowerment of women and the implementation of gender equality is mainly due to the untiring struggle of women for their rights and equality between women and men all over the world.

Nevertheless, meeting the commitments for women's rights and gender equality made in Beijing 1995, the journey remains unfinished: There is still a long way to go towards the full realization of gender equality in everyday's lives for women and men, free from gender stereotypes and discrimination, free from violence against women and girls providing equal share of gainful and care work and equal access to labour markets and productive resources. Despite the fact that gender equality should be a core value of democratic societies, it is still no reality - nowhere in the world.

Many challenges remain to fulfil the promises made in the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action as well as the recommendations for actions proposed in the 12 critical areas of concern. The National Council of German Women's Organisations would like to

make some remarks on the current challenges that affect the implementation, the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women in the following strategic objectives of the Platform for Action: Women and the economy, Women and poverty and Women in power and decision making.

Women's economic independence is of crucial importance to enable women to make real choices in their lives on an equal footing with men and in order to achieve de jure and de facto gender reality. The achievement of women's economic independence is a fundamental prerequisite to avoid poverty and social exclusion. Women are particularly vulnerable when experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination such as based on their migration status, ethnic origin, disability, age, religion or belief and sexual orientation.

In order to break women's dependence on their partners and/or the state, the individualization of the social security and taxation rights has to be guaranteed. However, women's real and full economic independence is not yet a reality in Germany and there is still a huge gap between de jure and de facto situation: The German Constitution legally provides equal rights for women and men. Theoretically, they do have equal opportunities but there are still persisting gender gaps in accessing the labour market, employment pay, poverty risk, pensions and unpaid work.

In Germany, the life course of women and men still widely differ from each other. Women do interrupt gainful employment more frequently and for a longer period than men do. They work less hours on the basis of lower salaries and are more often working in precarious jobs (e.g. minijobs). Minijobs are mostly accepted by women and are based on a legal regulation which assumes that there should be a category of workers with low wages (less than 450 euros per month) in which the access to independent social security is blocked. Another legal regulation which sets the framework for minijobs are the existing tax categories.

A recent study by the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) on the basis of income and tax statistics shows that income and assets of women are lower by 50 % than that of men and that women have to pay even higher taxes on comparable incomes which relates to unequal tax scales and the tax splitting of family incomes (Ehegattensplitting - a system where both partners are taxed based on half of their combined income).

Access to a sufficient income securing an independent livelihood and to assets is more difficult for women compared to men. This is clearly illustrated by the present gender pay gap of 22 % (For comparison: The average gender pay stands at 16% within the EU) whereby the income gap even increases considering the age and the hierarchical position of women in enterprises and companies. Particularly jobs in the social care systems which are mostly done by women such as care for children and other dependent persons are paid much less than male-dominated jobs.

The continually increasing labour market participation of women in Germany from 60 % (2005) to 71.5% (2012) is generally celebrated as a positive development for women's economic power. These figures do not take into consideration that many women in Germany are employed in part-time, atypical and precarious work. On these grounds it is misleading to derive a success story from the mere raise of the general employment rate since these figures are not converted into full-time equivalents thus indicating the absolute volume of women's working time.

The percentage of women in executive positions fails to reflect their presence in the working world and their high levels of education. Women are particularly underrepresented among the "top executives" – on management and supervisory boards. Female board members are still only to be found in just one of five large German companies. The executive floors in Germany continue to be predominantly a male monoculture. Only 4% of the members of the management boards and 15% of the members of the supervisory boards of the 200 largest companies are female. Additionally women are still underrepresented in executive positions in administration and science.

The gender difference of life and income courses results in a gender pension gap of 59,6 % which means that women do have 59,6 % less income in old age than men do (Compared to the gender pension gap of 39% within EU). This is approximately three times more than the gender pay gap! The gender pension gap shows that gender inequalities accumulate throughout women's lives. Poverty in old age is a painful experience of many women who have committed themselves to unpaid work of caring for children and other dependent persons. The mothers' income in old age is even decreasing with the number of children they have due to insufficient or limited access to paid work during the care time; each child means 50 € less of pension.

We can summarize that the Beijing Platform of Action on the critical areas of concern mentioned above can be read like a prevailing demand to the present economic and employment policy in Germany since women's economic independence is far from being achieved and many women remain in a dependence status. On the contrary, the legal framework on the basis of the "male breadwinner" prevents women to become economically independent and provides limited access to decent work and the social protection system. This results also in a gender segregated labour market and the over-representation of women in unpaid care work.

We wish that this Beijing + 20 review process of Beijing Platform for Action at national, regional and international levels and the forthcoming post-2015 Development Agenda will make an important contribution towards the protection and the safeguarding of women's rights, the empowerment of women and the achievement of equality between women and men. Gender equality policies have to be enforced in particular when considering the growing anti-feminist movement which threatens the successful implementation of gender policies, declarations and instruments made over the last 20 years. Sufficient human and financial resources for gender policies and structures aimed at achieving equality between women and men at all levels have to be ensured.

It is still a long way to go for advancing and completing the unfinished journey towards substantive and sustainable equality between women and men. The disappointment and frustration of many women is growing since their voices are not taken seriously into consideration when demanding what should be just a matter of course: Gender equality. We do not want to wait another 20 years to close the gender gaps.