

## OPINIONS

## EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

574TH PLENARY SESSION OF THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE,  
14.12.2022-15.12.2022

**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on ‘Gender-based investments in national recovery and resilience plans’**

**(Own-initiative opinion)**

(2023/C 100/02)

Rapporteur: **Cinzia DEL RIO**

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| Plenary Assembly decision                    | 20.1.2022  |
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| Section responsible                          | Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion   |
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### 1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The EESC reiterates that only greater and better economic and social convergence in the European Union can help ensure full gender equality and the promotion of equal opportunities by focusing on measures and strategies in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights.

1.2. The EESC points out that most of the national recovery and resilience plans (NRRPs) have been drawn up by the Member States without an *ex-ante* assessment of the impact of individual investments in terms of removing gender inequalities and making it easier for women to access and stay in the labour market. Very few Member States have taken a strategic approach with specific, cross-cutting measures and reforms to the six investment strands under the NRRP. The methodology adopted by the European Commission is based on an impact assessment of how effective the measures implemented are. To this end, the EESC recommends that the Commission adopt comparable specific indicators at the evaluation stage to measure improvements in equal pay, access to the labour market, the reconciliation of work and care time, and in promoting of women’s self-entrepreneurship.

1.3. The measures set out in the NRRPs include direct and indirect measures, with different impacts in the short or medium-to-long term, to encourage women to access and stay in employment, but in a framework that is fragmented and uneven across countries. The EESC considers it a priority that, when the NRRPs are being implemented, both direct and indirect measures are stepped up. This will require clear, lasting investment channels with resource planning also in the medium-to-long term.

1.4. Among the direct measures to promote women’s employment, the EESC believes that providing incentives for creating stable, quality jobs for women should be given priority over other occasional incentives, and should be excluded from the State aid map.

1.5. The EESC calls for the bonus clause for companies that promote female employment to be strengthened and extended to all public procurement contracts, and for public calls for tender for implementing entities to be regulated with an explicit requirement for gender equality objectives.

1.6. The EESC welcomes policy measures for encouraging and supporting self-entrepreneurship provided for in some NRRPs, and calls for the support also to include financial and managerial training and access to financial instruments.

1.7. As stated in the Commission communication on gender equality, the EESC considers it important when implementing the NRRPs to take action on the taxation aspect by offering tax breaks on the second source of household income for low-income households, and on the income of less-affluent, single-parent families.

1.8. Indirect measures in the NRRPs include investment in childcare and care services. The EESC believes it paramount to invest resources in services for reconciling working time and time spent on long-term care, to provide additional services, and to make these services available to low-income households.

1.9. The EESC believes that specific investments to incentivise women's participation in the medium and long term in technical and scientific institutes and university courses (STEM), which can promote women's employment in sectors that are currently male-dominated, can no longer be postponed.

1.10. The EESC recommends that NRRPs be planned and coordinated in a way that complements all other Community resources and programmes, starting with resources and programmes for cohesion and rural areas. The Commission's assessment in the framework of the European Semester with country-specific recommendations should include these objectives with a gender perspective, using new, transparent, accessible indicators that are comparable across countries and broken down by gender.

1.11. The EESC recommends gender budgeting at all levels of public administration to be made mandatory in the European Semester phase.

1.12. The available data shows that involvement of the social partners and civil society organisations has been limited and infrequent in most countries. The EESC recommends that they be fully involved in implementing, monitoring and evaluating the NRRPs at European, national and local level.

## 2. Introduction

2.1. This opinion aims to highlight reforms and investments that promote gender equality provided for by the Member States in the NRRPs, on the basis of available information that is also updated by the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Presidency of the EU Council. It should be noted that the EIGE (European Institute for Gender Equality) is conducting a study on gender equality and gender mainstreaming during post-COVID-19 recovery for the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2023<sup>(1)</sup>, precisely on the measures set out in the NRRPs with a gender-based approach at all of their stages, from planning to implementation and evaluation, and on the extent to which Member States considered equality to be a lever for recovery.

2.2. On 21 July 2020, the European Council, in its conclusions, adopted the NextGenerationEU plan, together with the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF 2021-2027). The objectives of the MFF and NextGenerationEU include promoting equal opportunities by ensuring that the activities and actions of the relevant programmes and instruments incorporate the gender perspective and can make a meaningful contribution to achieving equality, in line with the European strategy.

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<sup>(1)</sup> The EIGE's Study on *Gender equality and gender mainstreaming in the COVID-19 recovery*, to be published in 2023.

2.3. Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council <sup>(2)</sup> establishes the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), which aims to support post-pandemic recovery, promote cohesion, and invest in the green and digital transitions. The Regulation explicitly states that NRRPs have to promote gender equality. The EESC endorses the Regulation's recognition of the importance of measures combating gender inequalities, because it is in line with the objectives of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

2.4. The Commission, in its Communication on the 2021 Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (AGS 2021) of 17 September 2020, set out the guidelines for the RRF, calling on Member States to pay special attention to disadvantaged groups, women and young people entering the labour market, by creating quality job opportunities.

2.5. EU Delegated Regulation of 28 September 2021 sets out the common indicators and detailed elements of the recovery and resilience scoreboard, defining 14 indicators. Of these indicators, only 4 are specifically disaggregated by gender <sup>(3)</sup>. For example, there is no gender breakdown in indicators 6 and 9 for supported businesses that are run by women.

2.6. The war in Ukraine, following the Russian aggression, has led to a significant slowdown, with growth prospects characterised by uncertainty, especially with regard to the supply of energy resources and the spike in costs — factors that affect the allocation of expenditure and investment in national budgets. This uncertainty will also have an impact on the implementation of the NRRPs.

2.7. The world of work and society as a whole are trying to emerge from the crisis by looking towards a long-term economic and social recovery, on which the NRRPs are based, and which cannot disregard the adoption of a gender-based framework to address and overcome the inequalities and gender gaps that the COVID-19 crisis has unfortunately widened in some production sectors, population groups and local and regional situations <sup>(4)</sup>.

### 3. Background, preparation of the funding and resources allocated to the NRRPs

3.1. Last July, the European Commission presented the European Parliament and the Council with a review report on the implementation of the scheme, which also addresses gender inequalities <sup>(5)</sup>. The report explains the state of play of the contributions received from Member States on the basis of the NRRPs they submitted, which sets out the target priorities of the 25 NRRPs analysed on the basis of the six action pillars of the RRF <sup>(6)</sup>.

3.2. Most of the measures proposed by the Member States have cross-cutting objectives that do not necessarily specifically target gender equality; out of 129 proposed measures, only 13 have so far been launched with investments. Not all Member States have planned reforms and resources explicitly addressing gender-related challenges or targeting women as beneficiaries. Innovative measures in sectors with low female employment are also poor <sup>(7)</sup>. There is a lot of focus on childcare, caregiving and education. The Commission's report shows that only a few countries have NRRPs which provide for a strategic approach with measures and reforms addressing gender equality.

3.3. Other Member States have prioritised certain strands, such as measures for social and territorial cohesion, focussing on equal opportunities, which often also incorporates the goal of gender equality; or measures aimed at vulnerable groups, which often include women and young people. Finally, measures to accompany the green and digital transition with a focus

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<sup>(2)</sup> Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility (OJ L 57, 18.2.2021, p. 17).

<sup>(3)</sup> These specific indicators are: a) researchers working in supported research facilities; b) number of participants in education or training; c) number of people in employment or engaged in job searching activities; d) number of young people aged 15-29 years receiving support.

<sup>(4)</sup> The EIGE's 2021 Research note on *Gender equality and the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic*.

<sup>(5)</sup> COM(2022) 383 final.

<sup>(6)</sup> The Netherlands submitted their NRRP later than other countries; Hungary's NRRP is currently on hold for issues related to respect for the rule of law.

<sup>(7)</sup> See footnote 1 and the article *PNRR Italia, Gender Gap e politiche per l'innovazione e la digitalizzazione nel PNRR: quali misure?* [Italy's NRRP, gender gap and policies for innovation and digitalisation in the NRRP] by Marusca de Castries, Università degli Studi di Roma Tre, and Barbara Martini, Università di Roma Tor Vergata, September 2022.

on training, where women in some countries lag behind in terms of equal access to training and reskilling programmes. It should be noted that most Member States have not identified gender-based violence as one of the challenges in the framework of measures to support gender equality in their NRRPs.

3.4. The NRRPs were drawn up with a national *ex-ante* assessment of the economic and social situation, broadly in line with spending priorities that had already been set and which did not take the gender dimension into account in terms of either resources allocated or the content of investment projects submitted. The initial proposal for the Commission's RRF Regulation did not include any reference to gender equality as an objective and did not mention women as a specific target group. Only subsequently, as the result of pressure from the economic and social partners and civil society organisations, was a gender dimension added to the NRRPs in the Regulation published in February 2021. This is also why the gender dimension and gender budget do not feature in all NRRPs, but only in those that had originally established a gender-based classification for spending and investment.

3.5. The RRF requires Member States to indicate how the NRRPs address gender inequalities, but the impact assessment will only take into consideration how effective the measures implemented are. It is therefore important for the Commission to measure the effectiveness of the planned measures and investments at the evaluation stage, involving economic and social partners and civil society organisations, using comparable specific indicators. Data collected thus far do not reflect the actual national situation. It is therefore difficult to say now what impact some of the measures to tackle gender discrimination — especially cross-cutting measures — will have on the six pillars.

3.6. The resources allocated to the NRRPs do not give us a clear picture today of the investments supported not only by the RRF, but also by additional national public and private resources exclusively targeting gender equality in the various spheres of work and society. The resources allocated will only be able to be quantified at the implementation stage.

3.7. According to the Commission report on specific gender equality measures in the NRRPs, however, the percentage of actions varies widely, from 11 % allocated by Sweden to less than 1 % by Croatia, with several countries below 2 %. However consideration should also be given to the impact of indirect measures set out in the NRRPs, and direct and indirect measures planned with NextGenerationEU Community resources, supplementing the NRRPs, such as REACT-EU and the EAFRD (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development).

3.8. According to the Commission report and the initial information gathered by the EIGE, the picture that emerges is fragmented and uneven across countries. Not all countries provide data broken down by gender, despite being asked by the Commission to do so, to enable the Commission itself to report in a regular and timely way on gender-related expenditure in the NRRPs on the basis of some common elements.

3.9. As not all Member States have made available gender-based studies before drafting the NRRPs there is no impact assessment on measures on additional and quality employment or on skilled jobs. Gender equality was considered a generic cross-cutting principle by 14 countries<sup>(8)</sup>, but only Spain mentioned the criterion of gender mainstreaming throughout its NRRP. Italy has introduced specific measures for gender equality and has also detailed the impact of the measures in terms of increased employment, but concerns remain as to their actual effectiveness and the quality of the measures<sup>(9)</sup>. In other countries, indirect measures such as investment in work-life balance, investment in care services, incentives to take part in STEM training, and improvements in working conditions and training have been planned to promote gender equality. These will have an impact in the medium to long term, but it cannot be quantified today. Alongside these investments, some Member States have planned direct measures such as recruitment incentives and subsidies for female entrepreneurship.

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<sup>(8)</sup> See footnote 1.

<sup>(9)</sup> See footnote 6.

3.10. Some countries have paid particular attention to 'gender procurement'<sup>(10)</sup> with conditionality measures for the recruitment of women and young people in public contracts concluded with NRRP resources. It would be advisable to regulate public calls for tender for implementing entities, explicitly requiring gender equality objectives.

3.11. The innovative NRRPs in this field include those of Spain, Italy and France. The Spanish NRRP gave a significant commitment by stipulating that all public administrative procedures must adopt a gender perspective. The Italian NRRP introduced guidelines on equal opportunities in contracts financed by the NRRP, that provide for the use of bonus measures and model clauses in calls for tenders, differentiated according to the sector, type and nature of the project, with the obligation to reserve 30 % of the hires needed for the contract's implementation for young people under 36 years of age and women, as well as certification of gender equality by companies. The French NRRP instead included the introduction of new indicators for companies to calculate professional equality and progression through an action plan, while the Irish and Croatian NRRPs award funding bonuses to companies that adopt criteria for the promotion of gender equality<sup>(11)</sup>.

3.12. The Commission's July 2022 report highlights that discussions with the economic and social partners and civil society organisations during the preparation of the NRRPs were extremely limited and infrequent. Social stakeholders and other civil society organisations express great concern regarding participation in the implementation and monitoring phase of the actions. In particular, gender experts point out<sup>(12)</sup> that without reliable, comparable, targeted, gender-disaggregated and, above all, quality data covering different areas and sectors, it will be difficult to assess the impact of measures. The EESC strongly recommends that social partners and civil society organisations that promote equal opportunities be more closely involved, both by the European institutions and by national and regional institutions in implementing, evaluating and monitoring the NRRPs.

#### 4. NRRP background assessments

4.1. The EESC emphasises the importance of implementing the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes achieving gender equality among the 17 goals, together with the objectives set out in the Commission Communication *A Union of Equality: gender equality strategy 2020-2025*<sup>(13)</sup> in the areas of equal participation in different economic sectors, and the gender pay gap.

4.2. The gender equality strategy encompasses policies and actions aimed at combating all forms of discrimination and inequality, including those directed at the LGBTIQ community<sup>(14)</sup>, and should be a reference point for implementing the NRRPs. The EESC stresses the importance of implementing key actions, shared with all parties, to ensure equal participation and opportunities in the labour market, to reduce the pay gap for equal roles and the lack of access to senior management

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<sup>(10)</sup> Gender procurement is an innovative strategy introduced by the European Commission to foster investment in equality through the inclusion of specific gender-sensitive bonus requirements or criteria that include social parameters. Gender procurement aims to increase gender equality in the labour market, improve the presence of women in top jobs and reduce the pay gap. The EIGE's report on Gender-responsive public procurement: the key to fair and efficient public spending in the EU, published in 2022, indicates how public procurement can guide and support gender equality by improving the effectiveness and quality of public spending with case studies and recommendations.

<sup>(11)</sup> Data collected from an EIGE analysis, see footnote 1.

<sup>(12)</sup> The European Parliament's briefing on Gender equality in the Recovery and Resilience Facility, published in April 2022, in which concerns from different studies carried out at national level (both by research centres and universities) are expressed.

<sup>(13)</sup> Communication from the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions of 5 March 2020. COM/2020/152 final.

<sup>(14)</sup> Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — Union of Equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025' (COM(2020) 698 final) (OJ C 286, 16.7.2021, p. 128).

positions, and to achieve gender balance in decision-making and policy. The EESC calls for the swift adoption and implementation of the directive on pay transparency<sup>(15)</sup>, which sets out tools and measures at national level to address and close the pay gap, and calls for the causes and responsibilities to be closely monitored.

4.3. The objective of greater participation by women in the labour market needs to be addressed in a structural and comprehensive manner, taking into account economic, educational, geographical, social and cultural variables, including in remote and rural areas. An integrated approach should therefore be adopted, drawing the contributions of all European, national and regional institutions with effective social dialogue mechanisms with all actors and at all levels.

4.4. In order to increase women's participation in the labour market, the EESC notes the urgent need for all Member States to implement — as soon as possible — the Work-Life Balance Directive (Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council<sup>(16)</sup>), which introduces rules on family leave and flexible working arrangements for workers, and promotes a fair sharing of care responsibilities between parents, helping to remove obstacles that impact people's ability to freely decide to have children and become parents.

4.5. In the context of the Semester, the 2019 and 2020 Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) on actions to reduce gender inequalities have prompted some Member States to incorporate a gender dimension into the NRRPs<sup>(17)</sup>, but unfortunately in a framework of action that is fragmented across countries.

4.6. Following the pandemic and its impact on the situation of women, CSRs have been sporadic and infrequent. In 2022, only three countries (Austria, Germany and Poland) had CSRs covering women's participation in the labour market and the operation of childcare services, while a further 22 countries received CSRs for disadvantaged groups<sup>(18)</sup>, which led to indirect measures on women's employment and their situation, which were difficult to quantify. The EESC notes that in the light of data on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on women's economic and social situation, gender-equality-specific CSRs would have been desirable in order to call for coherent *ex-ante* programming in the NRRPs, including targeted investments.

4.7. In several reports, the EIGE highlights the unequal distribution of family burdens, especially in the areas of childcare and long-term care for older people and people with disabilities<sup>(19)</sup>. These responsibilities are one of the main reasons for women's low participation levels in the labour market<sup>(20)</sup>. With the lockdown and the closure of schools, the situation has worsened. In this context, it should be noted that many NRRPs recognise the relationship between unpaid caring and work-life balance measures, and have introduced specific measures that help strengthen childcare services<sup>(21)</sup>.

4.8. These services should also be made accessible to less affluent families by reviewing pricing criteria to make it easier for all to use them. Particular attention should be paid to promoting full-time education in all schools of all types and levels through school-based and extracurricular activities, and to providing additional services in preschools, such as before- and after-school clubs, and to boosting the number of public summer holiday clubs available to girls and boys. These are indirect measures which must find secure and lasting investment channels, which are unfortunately not reflected in the NRRPs with medium- to long-term resource planning.

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<sup>(15)</sup> The proposal for a directive on pay transparency is being negotiated in trilogue.

<sup>(16)</sup> Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU (OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, p. 79).

<sup>(17)</sup> The European Parliament's report on CSRs and RRs — Thematic overview on gender-related issues, published in October 2021.

<sup>(18)</sup> See footnote 14.

<sup>(19)</sup> Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on The role of family members caring for people with disabilities and older persons: the explosion of the phenomenon during the pandemic (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C 75, 28.2.2023, p. 75), which provides important recommendations on measures to be taken.

<sup>(20)</sup> The EIGE's report, Gender mainstreaming — gender stakeholder consultation, published in 2019.

<sup>(21)</sup> See footnote 1.

4.9. The EESC would like to see training measures for job centre operators aimed at providing gender-sensitive guidance to establish and disseminate a culture free of gender stereotypes. At the same time, it is important to promote partnerships between businesses and workers in employment and training in order to promote the integration of women into sectors in which men are predominantly employed.

4.10. The EESC supports the idea of prioritising incentives for companies that hire women who are the beneficiaries of active policies with stable employment contracts and good working conditions. Additionally, incentives for encouraging and supporting self-entrepreneurship (including through targeted support for financial and managerial training and access to finance <sup>(22)</sup>) are important.

## 5. Specific assessments

5.1. The crisis has dealt a hard blow to women, who often find themselves having to accept unskilled jobs. Furthermore, involuntary part-time work is an increasingly prevalent condition among female workers. In order to reverse the trend and increase women's participation in the labour market and promote quality skilled employment, it is paramount that the NRRPs strengthen direct and indirect measures.

5.2. In order to reduce gender gaps, the EESC recommends that NRRPs be planned and coordinated in a way that is complementary with all other Community resources and programmes, starting with cohesion resources and programmes.

5.3. Existing gender differences and inequalities make public policies non-gender-neutral, so it is important for all institutions, including European, national and local, to adopt a gender budget document to supplement fiscal policies. To this end, the EESC recommends that gender budgeting be made mandatory in the European Semester phase <sup>(23)</sup>.

5.4. The EESC warns of the danger that the RRF, as designed, could increase disparities in some production sectors, such as the green and digital sectors. Although gender equality is a cross-cutting priority, without specific and measurable action to promote female employment, including in terms of high qualifications in sectors with high female employment, the danger is that the gender employment gap will widen even further, which could exacerbate the way women are relegated to less well-paid activities.

5.5. The NRRPs should include comparable indicators to measure improvements in pay equality, access to the labour market broken down by sector, reconciling working time and time spent on caring, subsidised credit, incentives to promote women's self-entrepreneurship, and self-employment.

5.6. Incentives for the permanent hiring of women should be prioritised over other incentives and should be excluded from the State aid map.

5.7. Improving the reconciliation of working time and time spent on caring is one of the main objectives for enabling women to fully achieve their potential in the world of work and to improve business productivity. To this end, the EESC considers it a priority to invest resources in services for reconciling work and caring, not only for additional services in preschools and promoting the progressive provision of free education services for the 0-3 age group for low-income households, but also stepping up investment to provide long-term care and support services.

5.8. Achieving the objectives in reconciling working time and caring must be supported by the recruitment of specific professionals and the need for continuous training for all operators of these services, which are currently dominated by women.

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<sup>(22)</sup> The Spanish NRRP allocates EUR 36 million to help female start-up entrepreneurs, while the Italian NRRP harnesses EUR 400 million to support women's participation in entrepreneurial activities.

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Gender lens investing as a way to improve gender equality in the European Union (OJ C 100, 16.3.2023, p. 16), which puts forward proposals to encourage investment in female entrepreneurship.

<sup>(23)</sup> The European Commission's discussion paper on Gender Budgeting Practices: Concepts and Evidence, published in June 2022.

5.9. The EESC points to the importance of extending the female employment bonus clause to all public procurement contracts, in order to support companies that commit to creating stable jobs, strengthening social inclusion and reducing gender employment gaps.

5.10. The gender gap in science subjects is very real and is entrenched from the earliest levels of education. Unfortunately, only a few NRRPs have included measures to increase women's participation in technical and scientific institutes and university courses (STEM). Therefore, specific investments are needed for training plans to encourage the participation of girls in science, in research and in development, as well as investments and new forms of support for targeted projects to ensure that more women participate in innovative activities. These measures will have a positive impact in the medium to long term and therefore need a strategic approach when they are programmed.

5.11. The EESC believes that it is also important to take action on the taxation aspect, including as recommended by the Commission <sup>(24)</sup> and on the basis of national legislation, by offering tax breaks on the second source of household income (which is often that of women) for low-income households. It is also important to offer tax breaks on the incomes of less-affluent single-parent families.

5.12. In addition to the measures outlined in the NRRPs, the EESC proposes, as strategic accompanying measures, mandatory gender equality certification to reduce the gender gap and to improve women's working conditions, tackle gender-based violence <sup>(25)</sup>, disseminate smart working through negotiations with the social partners, and facilitate remunerated voluntary part-time work (in accordance with national practices and legislation) for women returning from maternity leave.

5.13. The EESC welcomes the approach proposed by the Commission in the report, which provides for individual countries' NRRPs to be monitored from a gender perspective. It will be important for Commission missions in the different Member States to focus specifically on the gender-equality measures in place, ensuring that data is managed in such a way that it is transparent and accessible.

5.14. The EESC recommends the full involvement of the economic and social partners and civil society in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the NRRPs, including through dedicated 'steering committees' at European and national level to promote the coordinated planning of gender equality initiatives.

Brussels, 14 December 2022.

*The President*  
*of the European Economic and Social Committee*  
Christa SCHWENG

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<sup>(24)</sup> See footnote 10.

<sup>(25)</sup> Member States have been urged to ratify ILO Convention No 190 on violence and harassment in the world of work, which has so far only been ratified by two European countries.