

To: Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission
Charles Michel, President of the European Council
Andrej Plenković, Prime Minister of Croatia
Helena Dalli, European Commissioner for Equality
Olivér Várhelyi, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement

CC: Genoveva Ruiz-Calavera, Director for Western Balkans, European Commission
Olga Martin Gonzalez, Gender Equality Coordinator, Centre of Thematic Expertise Rule of Law/Fundamental Rights, Democracy, European Commission, DG NEAR

From: Regional Coalition for Gender Mainstreaming the EU Accession Process

Date: 18 May 2020

Subject: The 2020 Western Balkans Summit: A Missed Opportunity

Dear President von der Leyen,
Dear President Michel,
Dear Prime Minister Plenković,
Dear Commissioner Dalli,
Dear Commissioner Várhelyi,

We, a coalition of approximately 200 women's rights groups in the Western Balkans are writing to express our deep dissatisfaction with the failure of the Western Balkans Summit to address crucial gender inequalities in the region.

Gender-based violence and femicide remain widespread in the Western Balkans (WB).¹ Women remain underrepresented in decision-making processes, the labour market, and face widespread discrimination even in non-crisis situations.² The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing gender inequalities.³ Isolation measures have contributed to an increase in domestic violence, and even slower institutional response to such crimes.⁴ Despite the crucial importance of these issues, the WB Summit held on 6 May under the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) lacked a gender perspective.⁵

The Summit's concluding [Zagreb Declaration](#) had 20 points, six relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. Only point seven included a vague reference to gender equality: the EU welcomed strong commitment of WB partners to respect gender equality, among several other values enlisted. The Summit did not initiate any discussion regarding the worrying increase in gender-based violence in the WB or the preparedness of WB states to address this.⁶ Nor did it assess how this pandemic may impact men and women differently, particularly in relation to their labour rights, considering widespread labour rights violations.⁷ No gender perspective was reflected in discussions on reforms that WB partners should make during the EU Accession process. The lack of content-relevant discussion or conclusions related to gender equality gives the impression that, to the EU, "gender equality" is only a vague and empty reference, enlisted at the end of a sentence as part of a "box-ticking" exercise.

¹ European Parliament, [Women's Rights in the Western Balkans](#), January 2019.

² Kosovo Women's Network, [Gender-Based Discrimination and Labor in the Western Balkans](#), 2019.

³ See Kosovo Womens Network, [KWN Proposes Measures Addressing COVID-19 from a Gender Perspective: Recommendations to the Government of Kosovo](#), March 2020, among other reports in the region.

⁴ Experiences of women's rights groups in the region. See also, United Nations, [Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women](#), 2020.

⁵ The official [website](#) of the Council of European Union was the main source of information for this brief.

⁶ European Institute for Gender Equality, ["Corona Virus puts women in the frontline"](#), March 2020.

⁷ ILO, [COVID-19 and the world of work: Impact and policy responses](#), 2020.

Considering that gender equality is a fundamental value of the EU, it must be addressed within discussions at such summits. This can contribute to fulfilling EU commitments to furthering gender equality, including commitments to raise gender equality issues during political and policy dialogues with partner countries.⁸ For example, the EU *should* encourage *ex ante* gender impact analysis to inform the proposed measures and plans to confront the COVID-19 pandemic. Gender equality *should* inform all measures to address the pandemic in areas of health, education, and social policy. Participants *should* discuss how to address challenges in supporting women and vulnerable groups.⁹ The EU *should* strongly encourage gender responsive budgeting in the distribution of EU funds to address the pandemic.

Gender equality could have been mentioned specifically in point 11 of the Declaration, which stresses that “the focus should also be put on social development, and in particular on measures in the areas of health, education, social policy, and creating further opportunities for the youth” and women. However, the Summit missed all of these opportunities to incorporate a gender perspective and advance gender equality in the WB. This failure to prioritise or even attend to women’s security in terms of human security jeopardizes women’s and children’s lives, particularly amid the COVID-19 epidemic.

We strongly ***recommend***:

- EU representatives must stay true to their commitments to advance gender equality,¹⁰ fight violence against women, and mainstream gender throughout their policies; leading by example can encourage WB partners to improve gender equality within their countries;
- Encourage WB governments to further gender equality as a fundamental value of the EU, when taking efforts towards EU Accession and in addressing the COVID-19 crisis;
- Encourage governments to conduct ex-ante gender impact analysis, to inform political measures and strategic plans to confront COVID-19 in the short term and long term;
- Encourage WB leaders to consult gender equality mechanisms, women’s rights organisations and other CSOs in EU Accession-related reforms and COVID-19 measures;
- Encourage WB governments to use gender responsive budgeting when distributing EU funds dedicated for the social and economic recovery of vulnerable groups;
- Assess the impact of measures fighting COVID-19 on gender equality, by requesting relevant gender-disaggregated data from WB governments in their reporting on expenditures of EU funding; and
- Encourage WB governments to share best practices in fighting the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic from a gender perspective.

We thank you for your attention and action. We remain your allies in collaborating to realise EU commitments to furthering gender equality in the WB.

Sincerely,

[Albanian Women’s Empowerment Network](#) (Albania) (10 members)

[Association of Women Sandglass](#) (Serbia)

[Foundation “United Women” Banja Luka](#) (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

[Kosovo Women’s Network](#) (Kosovo) (161 members)

[Reactor – Research in Action](#) (North Macedonia)

[Rights for All](#) (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

[Voice Against Violence Network](#) (North Macedonia) (18 members)

[Women’s Rights Centre](#) (Montenegro)

⁸ [EU Gender Action Plan II](#), Objective 1, Indicator 1.1.2.

⁹ United Nations, [The Impact of COVID on Women](#), 2020.

¹⁰ European Commission, [A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#), 2020.