



Jos Bertrand, President of European Senior Organisation (ESO)

COVID-19 - Putting solidarity between generations and genders at the heart of the future of our societies

COVID-19 is confronting our societies with a global civilization crisis like we have never known. The crisis is affecting our values, our economy, our international relations.

As socialists and social democrats, we are convinced that this crisis can only be overcome by more solidarity: solidarity on a world scale between the different continents, solidarity within Europe and the European Union, solidarity in the redistribution of wealth, solidarity between women and men (gender equality), as well as solidarity between generations.

We are happy to see that our vision of solidarity is gaining ground and that many of our progressive proposals of solidarity, regarding fair taxes, support for social protection systems and public investments are garnering large support.

The PES has elaborated an ambitious COVID-19 recovery programme. As the European senior organisation of the PES, ESO has been happy to contribute to this programme. Support from civil society will be necessary to ensure its implementation. ESO has also contributed the perspective of the older generations to PES Women's new feminist economy publication, an initiative we welcome since **a feminist economy has the potential to improve the situation for the elderly, especially elderly women. Gender inequality tends to become worse as we grow older, since disadvantages and discriminations accumulate over a lifetime.**

Income, health and care, adapted housing, participation, exclusion and loneliness. These are the main concerns of the elderly. **And since women are the large majority in this population group, they are also the most concerned.**

Our older generations are severely affected by the COVID-19 health crisis. Most of the victims belong to the fragile elderly population, especially those who depend on care, healthcare and those who live in homes for the elderly. Although we have seen a lot of solidarity during this crisis, there have also been worrying signs that solidarity between generations is put at risk, for example with regards to selective access to healthcare and hospitals, as well as the lack of resources in care. We also experience more growing 'ageism' in our societies. Therefore, our **demand for an important European action program against ageism** is becoming more and more relevant.

In addition, as older people, we are insufficiently consulted and involved in the decisions that affect us. All too often, decisions affecting elderly or seniors are taken without consultation with the elderly or their organisations. ESO is therefore more than ever asking for **more involvement of seniors and their organisations in politics**. For example,



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there should be a similar treatment of seniors-organizations within political parties as of youth organizations; or a guaranteed representation of seniors in political bodies, in the same way as for young people. Senior organisations should also be better involved in advice and consultation forums, and supported by public authorities so that they can realize their assignments.

Poverty is on the rise, despite good policy intentions. In 2018, 1 out of 7 seniors (i.e. above 65 years old) in the European Union was at risk of poverty and this is an upward trend. Pensions are no longer enough to guarantee the elderly a life in dignity. Moreover, this poverty is feminised: 16% of retired women and 12% of retired men in the European Union have to live on an income below the poverty line. **On average, women's pension is 30% lower than that of men.** In Germany, Spain, Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, Portugal, Cyprus and Malta the score even worse, while the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Denmark and Estonia do relatively better in this area.¹

There are many reasons for the feminisation of poverty among the elderly. Since pensions are calculated on the basis of professional income and career, the gender pay gap plays an important role. This is compounded by the fact that more women than men have incomplete professional careers because of pregnancy, responsibility for childcare and education, and caring for sick or dependent family members or their parents. **Equal pay policies and a better division of labour and care tasks between women and men through improved care leave and career breaks are therefore very important. Voluntary work or career leave should be credited when calculating pensions.**

We know that this is a long-term struggle. **That is why ESO advocates a European guarantee system of minimum pension or income that is higher than the poverty threshold.** Such income should be automatically allocated by the responsible authorities in Member States or regions. After all, it is a well-known problem that given the complexity of some social provisions and entitlements, many people who are qualified for certain rights are not aware of them or do not know how to enjoy these rights. This is more the case for the elderly than for other age groups, also more the case for women than for men and for citizens with migrant backgrounds. Elderly women of migrant backgrounds are doubly discriminated against. Interesting proposals and examples concerning this issue exist in Belgium.²

Europe must also help Member States and their regions and municipalities to invest in care and health care. The COVID-19 health crisis has exposed the weaknesses of our systems: insufficient hospital beds to cope with crises, lack of health and care

¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20200207-1>

² <http://www.luttepauvrete.be/publications/automatisationdroits.pdf>



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personnel, over-scaled healthcare facilities, the disproportionate influence and power of the health and pharma industry.

Most health and care professionals are women and their professions are financially and socially undervalued. In several Member States and at the EU-level, socialists and social democrats, including PES Women, are demanding political initiatives to reassess these professions and make them better paid and more attractive for both women and men. ESO welcomes and supports these policy intentions.

The social impact of measures to combat the virus, such as isolation and limitation of social contacts, has serious consequences for the elderly. Loneliness is a frequently voiced problem among the elderly, which also has a gender dimension since elderly women are more likely to live alone than elderly men,³ and the limitation of social contacts to combat the virus and the introduction of digitalisation has hit the elderly and less favoured groups in our society hard. In this area, we have seen an enormous increase in digitalisation, in social and financial services, also in communication. **ESO advocates initiatives to tackle the digital divide for both women and men, but also to continue to guarantee personal service for everyone, especially in the banking and social services.**

Finally, ESO also advocates substantial investments in adapted housing for the elderly. Europe can contribute to this. Firstly, this can be achieved by introducing the principle of “**life-proof construction**”, whereby accessibility and safety are taken into account when planning and building houses. There is also a great need for **investment in affordable assisted living apartments, flats for the elderly that allow the elderly to live independently for longer, but also in small-scale homes for the elderly.** Housing policies for the older generations also require a gender dimension, since elderly women often have particular difficulties accessing decent housing, not least because of their higher risk of poverty. ESO is therefore very pleased with the PES investment programme that offers room for support for these initiatives that must then be implemented by Member States, regions and municipalities.

The COVID-19 pandemic challenges the cohesion of our societies. Together we can meet this challenge and we can get out of the crisis better. Solidarity between women and men and between the generations is the only way!

ESO's policy proposals:

³ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=752&newsId=2349&furtherNews=yes>



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- The **gender pay and pension gaps** between men and women, whether old or young, must be fought vehemently
- **A European system for a guaranteed minimum income above the poverty level** can be an important step for the fight against poverty among young or old people
- European Union should contribute to **substantial, gender-sensitive investments in care and healthcare but also in adapted housing at affordable prizes for the elderly.**
- **A European gender mainstreamed action-program against ageism** is necessary to enforce e.g. access to sustainable health care regardless of age or gender and to promote solidarity between generations. It can also help to raise awareness that many older people, especially older women, make a sustainable political and social contribution through volunteer work, often by relieving the burden on young people (e.g. through child care).
- Strengthen support of older people who provide care, mostly health care, for relatives. **Voluntary work should be counted towards pension rights.**
- The digital divide needs to be tackled and **personal face-to-face services should also be guaranteed for anyone without financial discrimination**, especially in the banking and in social services.