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Adopted PES Women Declaration on Women in Asylum and Migration

The war in Syria is in its 5th year and today, we face a situation where about half of its population of around 21 million inhabitants is displaced, the bigger share within their own country, and more than 4 million in the neighbouring states of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. The situation in Afghanistan, Irak and a number of African countries is deteriorating and causing further movement of refugees towards Europe. The support systems of the main countries of reception are under extreme pressure; e.g. in Lebanon, only a small share of the Syrian children can enroll in schools, food is coming short and health care is insufficient.

At the same time, there seems to be no appeasement in sight in Syria. On the contrary, the international community is split more than ever over the issue, giving contradicting signs and taking isolated steps in no alignment with international peace building strategies. This complete failure affects all human beings, old and young, male and female, to an existential extent. It is not surprising that people leave their homes when they are destroyed and their lives and physical integrity are threatened.

UNHCR has shown great sensitivity about the situation of refugee women and girls as from 1975 and developed numerous analyses, guidelines and statements ever since : "Women and girls comprise about half of any refugee, internally displaced or stateless population. UNHCR works to promote gender equality and ensure their equal access to protection and assistance. The integration of a gender perspective cuts across all sectors. For example, shelters should be safe for women and offer privacy, and assistance in construction or maintenance should be available. Food distribution systems should take family roles into account and ensure it reaches all. Sanitation facilities should be accessible and separated for men and women. Women should be able to collect water and fuel without risking rape or other abuse."

European citizens all over the EU member and neighbouring states have shown great compassion when refugees arrived at their coasts and borders, in their train stations and parks. The solidarity and humanity of civil society has been and still is impressing, be it in Lampedusa or Lesbos, in Skopje or Munich, in Belgrade or Brussels, at the Austrian-Hungarian or Serbian-Croatian borders. This movement of civil society, jointly with professional aid organisations and numerous people in local and regional authorities, has put shame on all those who still continue to resist the system of a fair relocation amongst the EU member states and who are still reluctant to substantially raise the aid to the crisis neighbouring zones through the international aid agencies as the World Food Programme and UNHCR .

PES Women declare that a gender sensitive approach in the new EU asylum and migration policy is urgently needed. This must be ensured on several levels and by different means:

On the Right to Asylum

The Right to Asylum is a fundamental and constituting principle of Human Rights. The Dublin III regulation of the EU has been subject of criticism by UNHCR and the European Council on Refugees and Exiles as it failed to provide fair, efficient and effective protection of asylum seekers. Therefore, a revision of the system is urgently needed.

- Asylum procedures must include a fair examination of the asylum claim, be processed by transparent and accountable public authorities and with a gender and culture sensitive approach.
- Gender-based violence, like forced marriage, rape as a method of warfare and discrimination and persecution of women must be recognized as a legal ground for asylum.
- The right to asylum must be granted for each person individually, a woman's right to asylum must not be derived from the male family member thus creating further dependence.
- The standards for granting asylum in EU Member States show a great variety. However, a human right must be guaranteed on common principles and transparent procedures. The revision of Dublin III must tackle this issue. It cannot depend upon where you ask for asylum within the EU whether you are granted the refugee status. The EU must live up to the principle of universality for the weakest of all, the refugees.
- At the same time, it is essential to create a list of safe third countries in close cooperation with UNHCR in order to guarantee the safety of rejected asylum seekers.
- The introduction of a European Humanitarian Visa could contribute to safer entries. Those must be issued as close as possible to the conflict region in order to guarantee safe routes and avoid smuggling and trafficking of human beings.
- Solidarity is needed for EU border and neighbouring countries. The authorities on the EU borders must receive massive support from the EU for adequate reception, registration and screening processes. This must include expertise in gender sensitive asylum procedures and adequate reception centers, including the fair distribution of (limited) resources. The first countries of reception in the conflict neighbouring zones must be assisted in their efforts to take care of refugees.
- Solidarity from the EU must also go to the international aid organisations, as the UN humanitarian response is heavily underfunded.

On the Right to a Safe and Secure Arrival

About a third of all refugees from Syria on their difficult, exhausting and dangerous journey to Europe are women. It is essential to ensure their safety, security and integrity throughout all phases of the route to a hopefully peaceful future. The longer the procedures on the border take, the more people will get desperate. Up until now, refugees travelling to Europe have shown admirable discipline and strength. But winter is coming and borders are being shut down throughout the EU Member States. This will cause despair and hopelessness, unless clear signals are given that everyone will be granted a fair and transparent asylum procedure. It is unacceptable that a "war of the fittest" starts at this point, which for sure will leave women and unaccompanied young children behind.

- When establishing and managing the journey of refugees through Europe, it is vital to involve the expertise and knowledge of professional welfare and aid

organisations in order to guarantee equal access of women to health care, especially for pregnant women.

- The EU “hotspots” must consist of safe and secure places for women and children, especially for women travelling alone and for unaccompanied minors. These safe spots, or other ones, should also be available for refugees from the LGBT when needed.
- Special attention needs to be paid to the problem of smuggling and trafficking, especially of women and young children, thus also preventing cruel sexual exploitation and abuse.

On the Need for an Inclusive Welcome for Women

Once the difficult and dangerous journey is over, and the country of arrival and processing the asylum procedure is decided, it is essential to start with integration measures fast, both for women and men. Asylum procedures can take time, and this time must be used to check out the language expertise as well as the overall educational and professional status of asylum seekers. Models to a faster entry into the labour market are needed. Refugee children and children of asylum seekers must be enrolled in schools, old and sick refugees must receive appropriate care. This is vital both for a fast integration when the refugee status is granted as well as in the case of a return to another country. In the past month, asylum seekers, despite their overall desperate situation, have very often proven that they wanted to give something back to the communities of reception – even if they had only been there for a few hours.

- Training of the language of the host country must be provided from the very first day of arrival and with a gender sensitive approach; in some cases, women only language courses will be needed in order to guarantee equal access.
- The procedures for the recognition of diplomas and professional degrees need to be speeded up. The faster this happens, the earlier refugees will be able to contribute to their host society economically and thus integrate easier.
- A big share of the Syrian refugees, including the Syrian women, has a good education in professions of great value to European societies. Therefore, it is not only important to explore their specific resources, but also to grant them the right to work individually, especially when they came together with their family or joined in later on the ground of family reunion. European societies live the model of independent and self-determined women, and this is the model we should offer refugee women in a welcoming and inclusive community.

PES Women are convinced that a gender sensitive approach in asylum and migration policy is an integral part of the Human Rights agenda. It is vital in order to prevent discrimination both in the countries of origin as well as in the host communities. The EU and the Member States will have to develop a new European Integration and Inclusion Agenda, in order to assist local and regional authorities as the true “hotspots” of short, middle and long term integration. In the long run this path will prove to be not only enriching for our common European society, it has the potential to bring a signal to those still belligerent in Syria and other countries: Respect, gender equality and solidarity can and do make a difference. If Europe fails to be welcoming, the warmongers will win.