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*Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality*

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**2013/2020(INI)**

4.9.2013

## **OPINION**

of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality

for the Committee on Foreign Affairs

on the situation of human rights in the Sahel region  
(2013/2020(INI))

Rapporteur: Mariya Gabriel

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## SUGGESTIONS

The Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality calls on the Committee on Foreign Affairs, as the committee responsible, to incorporate the following suggestions in its motion for a resolution:

- having regard to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Optional Protocol thereto,
  - having regard to the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa,
  - having regard to the UN Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict, and to Security Council Resolutions 1325 (2000) and 1820 (2008),
  - having regard to the EU Plan of Action on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Development Cooperation (2010-2015),
  - having regard to the EU guidelines on violence against women and girls and combating all forms of discrimination against them,
- A. whereas infringements of human rights and the political, environmental, developmental and humanitarian crisis in the Sahel region affect women in particular, who are often victims of discrimination, exceptional physical and human insecurity, chronic poverty and marginalisation;
- B. whereas women in the Sahel region make up the majority of small-scale farmers and yet they are penalised in terms of land rights; whereas this lack of ownership over land contributes to poverty among women;
- C. whereas an increasingly restrictive social environment is limiting women's mobility and productivity, and ultimately their capacity to function as effective leaders and defenders of women's rights;
- D. whereas gender equality, the political and economic empowerment of women, promotion of gender equality and the defence of women's rights are crucial to reducing poverty and encouraging sustainable development;
- E. whereas at the London Summit on Family Planning of July 2012 more than a hundred governments, international agencies and NGOs set themselves the objective of investing an additional USD 4 billion by 2020 in increasing the number of women using contraception in the world's 69 poorest countries, which include the Sahel countries, by 120 million, and whereas this funding comes on top of the current figure of USD 10 billion;
- F. whereas studies show that if women are educated and can earn and control income, a number of positive results follow: maternal and infant mortality declines, women and child health and nutrition improve, agricultural productivity rises, climate change can be

mitigated, population growth slows, economies expand and cycles of poverty are broken<sup>1</sup>;

1. Points out that women are frequently discriminated against when it comes to recognising their work in campaigning for peace; recalls that where more women are regularly engaged in conflict resolution and peace-building processes, they play a key role in peace negotiations, broadening the scope of reconstruction, rehabilitation and peace building; encourages, therefore, the participation of women in all national, regional and international reconciliation efforts for Mali, especially the north of the country; calls for national action plans under UN Security Council Resolution 1325 to be subject to regular reviews and for their priority points to be updated regularly;
2. Expresses concern at the discrimination suffered by women and girls in much of this region, particularly in terms of access to education, jobs with rights, and health, and in relation to issues such as forced marriage, sexual exploitation and genital mutilation;
3. Expresses its grave concern over the use of ‘public indecency’ laws and laws prohibiting association for ‘an immoral purpose’ when dealing with the LGBT community in Mali and the wider region; notes that while same-sex relationships are legal in the region, reports of discrimination are widespread;
4. Urges the EU and the Sahel countries to implement fully the following UN Security Council resolutions: Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, which calls for women’s participation in all aspects and at all levels of conflict resolution, Resolution 1820 on sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations, and the subsequent Resolutions 1888, 1889 and 1960, which build on the aforementioned resolutions; asks, therefore, for women’s participation in peace processes to be emphasised and guaranteed and for the need to include gender mainstreaming in conflict prevention, peace-keeping operations, humanitarian aid and post-conflict reconstruction to be recognised; deplores the extreme suffering inflicted on women, simply because they are women, in conflict zones; maintains that action of this kind, including the rape of girls by soldiers, forced prostitution, forced impregnation of women, sexual slavery, rape, sexual harassment and consensual abduction (by means of seduction) are crimes which must not be ignored; affirms that the EU must treat these as fundamental problems to be taken into account; emphasises that it is essential to ensure access to abortion for women and girls who have been raped in situations of armed conflict;
5. Stresses that efforts to tackle impunity, including in connection with gender-based violence in conflicts, which is an affront to women’s dignity, are key to restoring stability and building lasting peace; welcomes, therefore, the Malian Government’s application to the International Criminal Court and the establishment of an international commission of inquiry into the crimes and human rights violations committed in Mali;
6. Urges the Sahel countries to revise their laws regarding women and property rights; stresses the importance of women’s ownership over the land they farm and live on;
7. Highlights the case of Sahrawi women and their important role in Sahrawi society,

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<sup>1</sup> Isobel Coleman, ‘The global glass ceiling: why empowering women is good for business’, in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 89, May/June 2010, pp. 13-20; UN Population Fund, ‘State of world population 2009 – Facing a changing world: women, population and climate’.

particularly in the refugee camps, where illiteracy has decreased sharply from 95 % immediately after the Spanish colonial period to the present-day rate of 5 %; emphasises the crucial role of women in organising Sahrawi institutions and their high level of participation in decision-making at all levels, from local committees to parliament and government;

8. Condemns the human rights abuses, principally involving harassment and sexual violence, inflicted on Sahrawi women in the Moroccan-occupied territories, and used by the occupying forces as a mechanism for intimidating the Sahrawi people in their struggle for their legitimate right to self-determination;
9. Draws attention to the role played by the women of Western Sahara in peace-keeping, in promoting dialogue and conflict resolution and in maintaining Sahrawi society and structures;
10. Condemns interference in the internal affairs of third countries by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and reaffirms the right of all peoples to sovereignty and self-determination without outside interference; considers that defending women's rights and promoting policies to encourage the active participation of women in all aspects of social life are essential to democracy in all countries;
11. Recognises, however, the positive role played by the EIDHR in the protection of women's rights and the consolidation of democracy in third countries;
12. Welcomes the efforts of the African Union in respect of women's rights and recalls the importance of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) for stability in the region;
13. Calls for the development of policies which take into account the specific situation of vulnerable groups, such as women, children and people with disabilities, and, by extension, for the provision of relevant infrastructure, such as hospitals, schools and educational equipment, and the necessary social, psychological and administrative support; highlights the importance of cooperating and consulting with local women's organisations;
14. States that special attention needs to be paid to educating both sexes about gender issues from the start of schooling onwards, so that attitudes and social stereotypes change gradually and gender equality becomes a basic principle of society in the Sahel region;
15. Calls on the Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Council to encourage more countries in the region to make explicit statutory provision for women's and girls' rights and to prioritise programmes that would secure those rights, in particular access to public services, including in the field of education, access to health, sexual and reproductive rights, secure loans for food, land and productive resources, especially in rural areas, and access to health care and the justice system, in order to enhance women's financial independence by helping them make the transition from informal to formal work, their participation in political and economic decision-making, and the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls, including the eradication of early forced marriage and the barbaric practice of female genital mutilation;

16. Stresses that domestic violence is not a private family matter, and nor are excuses for violence which are entrenched in cultural or religious belief acceptable;
17. Urges the Commission, the EEAS and partner countries to prioritise the issue of impunity during peace negotiations and to ensure that the perpetrators of crimes of sexual violence are brought to justice;
18. Calls on the Sahel countries to adopt laws and concrete measures prohibiting and establishing penalties for all forms of violence against women, including domestic and sexual violence, sexual harassment and harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation and forced marriages, especially in the case of underage girls; highlights the importance of protecting the victims and providing specifically targeted services, while combating the impunity of attackers and ensuring that these crimes are investigated, tried and properly punished, as well as making justice fully available to all women, without any form of discrimination on religious and/or ethnic grounds;
19. Draws attention to the need to involve local women's associations in setting up and implementing projects, taking account of their knowledge and experience and making it easier for them to access national and international public funding;
20. Calls on the Sahel countries to ensure that all girls are registered at birth and subsequently enrolled in primary school education;
21. Calls on the Special Representatives of the EU for the Sahel and for human rights, respectively, to develop joint actions to secure women's rights in the region more effectively, by tackling impunity in connection with gender-based violence and all other forms of violence which are an affront to the dignity of women; urges the Commission, the EEAS and partner states to make women's rights and gender equality a priority for bilateral aid programmes and to provide sustainable and reliable funding for initiatives aimed at empowering women and boosting gender equality; particularly condemns violence as the principal obstacle to women's enjoyment of social and economic freedom; emphasises that the promotion of equality between men and women should be seen as a cross-cutting issue;
22. Urges the international community to dedicate more funds to advancing women's rights and empowerment in the region;
23. Notes that human trafficking is part of a wider organised crime problem which includes the illicit trafficking of drugs, oil, cigarettes, counterfeit medicine and firearms; urges the leaders of the Sahel countries to cooperate in strengthening law enforcement systems with a view to eradicating all forms of illicit trafficking, but in particular trafficking in human beings, which affects some of the youngest and poorest women in the region;
24. Deplores the fact that neither the EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel, adopted on 21 March 2011, nor the conclusions thereon adopted by the Foreign Affairs Council of 23 March 2012 contain any reference to the promotion of gender equality, the situation of women or the defence of women's rights;
25. Calls on the Sahel countries to step up their cooperation with a view to launching awareness campaigns on women's rights with NGOs, civil society, the UN and the EU;

26. Regrets the Commission's failure to place adequate emphasis on the gender dimension of poverty; believes the EU must invest in the specific needs of women and design social protection packages that address the challenges they face; emphasises that gender equality and the political and economic empowerment of women are of crucial importance to meeting development and poverty reduction goals in the Sahel; urges the Commission to ensure that gender equality and the empowerment of women are mainstreamed in all EU development policies and programmes relating to the Sahel region;
27. Condemns the fact that budget cuts in areas such as food security, health and education, which are of key importance in achieving the Millennium Goals, continue to exacerbate food and humanitarian crises in the Sahel; emphasises the fundamental need for structural action in the fields of agriculture, food security and nutrition, as well as specific measures to eradicate land-grabbing, in order to promote inclusive and sustainable growth and prevent the annual recurrence of food crises in the Sahel region;
28. Notes that women have an essential role to play in the development of the Sahel region, particularly in terms of nutrition, food security and food production, as they are the ones principally engaged in agriculture, although they still have almost no access to ownership of the land they cultivate; calls on the Commission to recognise the fundamental role of women, as smallholder farmers, in food security, and to invest in programmes which specifically support them; insists that the EU strategy should also focus on actions intended to ensure that the most vulnerable people, especially in rural areas, are able to benefit from agricultural training opportunities, education on nutrition, good health and working conditions, and a safety net in times of need; emphasises that in order for smallholder farmers, in particular women farmers, to be able not only to farm sustainably but also to develop their productive potential, they need to have increased access to microcredit loans so that they can invest in better seeds, fertilisers and irrigation methods and obtain the tools they need to protect their crops from pests and disease;
29. Highlights the urgent need to grant EU humanitarian aid to help achieve the Millennium Goals; underlines the importance of the goal of improving maternal health in order to reduce maternal mortality and ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and family planning; stresses the importance of education and awareness-raising in the area of sexual and reproductive health as an integral part of the women's health agenda;
30. Underlines the need to design and implement health programmes in order to strengthen health systems, taking into account the fact that the global economic crisis has undermined progress on HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and other diseases;

## RESULT OF FINAL VOTE IN COMMITTEE

Date adopted	2.9.2013
Result of final vote	+: 14 -: 0 0: 0
Members present for the final vote	Edit Bauer, Marije Cornelissen, Edite Estrela, Mikael Gustafsson, Astrid Lulling, Joanna Senyszyn, Marc Tarabella, Inês Cristina Zuber
Substitute(s) present for the final vote	Rosa Estaràs Ferragut, Mariya Gabriel, Iñaki Irazabalbeitia Fernández, Nicole Kiil-Nielsen, Antigoni Papadopoulou, Angelika Werthmann