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Press release: Launch of the NEWW Gender Watch Report 2008 on the situation of women in Eastern Europe

Gender equality not on the agenda

BRUSSELS - At a press conference this morning the Eastern European Women Network NEWW expressed deep concern about the state of women in Eastern Europe. "The situation of women has been deteriorating and neither the European Union nor national governments promote gender equality sufficiently", said Oksana Kisselyova, President of the Ukrainian Liberal Society Institute, at the occasion of the launch of the latest EU Gender Watch Report 2008 in Brussels.

The reports on three New Member States (Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Hungary) and three European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) countries (Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine) assess the situation of women after the transition, the national and European Commission's strategies for gender equality and the ODA structures regarding gender. The findings highlight the precarious and sometimes dire situation many women in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) are struggling with and the appalling lack of targeted support for gender equality.

"Europe is currently witnessing a heated debate on the lack of women in high EU positions, but the fate of ordinary women in Eastern Europe does not get any attention", said Monika Landmanová from IGPN (International Gender Policy Network), a Czech NGO. Women have been particularly affected by the economic decline having come in the wake of the transition process. The neoliberal politics pursued by most governments in the CEE region after the fall of the Berlin Wall have meant for many women to experience a painful downward spiral in the enforcement of gender equality and women's rights. The feminisation of poverty can be witnessed in the deterioration of equal employment opportunities, fair salaries, balanced political representation, access to credits, security and affordable health care.

The Ukraine has experienced an alarming steep decline in its GDP leaving almost 30% of the population, mostly women, now living in poverty. High inflation rates of around 10% put the most vulnerable groups, such as single mothers, at risk. The increasingly marginal role of women can also be seen in the Ukrainian parliament where only 8% of the parliamentarians are women - one of the lowest numbers worldwide.

As in the Ukraine the economic decline in Armenia led to a dramatic loss of women's economic and political clout - only 12 of the 131 members of parliament are women and due to rising levels of poverty and precariousness the country has become a primary source for women trafficking. In Georgia, a country struggling with civil strife and a severe economic crisis, only a third of all women are still working, since the collapse of day care facilities requires them to stay at home.

"Although gender equality is a fundamental principle of the European Union enshrined in the EC Treaty, Europe does not live up to its own standards and values", said Zofia Lapniewska from NEWW-Polska, who has coordinated the production of the report. Neither the New Member States, having been scrutinised in this report, nor the EU assistance within the framework of ENP forcefully address discrimination against women. "The EU is letting down women in Eastern Europe having entered the Union with high hopes", she added.

This indifference to women's needs on a domestic level is reflected by the development assistance (ODA) of the New Members States from the CEE region. Development assistance of Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Hungary, which mostly is targeted at ENP countries, does not prioritise gender equality

and equal opportunities issues and more often than not gender focused projects and statistics are completely lacking.

Their development policies therefore fundamentally contradict the European Union's ambitions on promotion of gender equality, as laid out in directives and the European Consensus on Development and fail to support the United Nations' third and fifth Millennium Development Goal (MDG) aiming at empowerment of women and improvement of maternal health. "As an Eastern European with a shared history of destitution with many people in the South I am ashamed by this appalling lack of solidarity", said Tania Tisheva from the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation.

Founded in 1991 the **Network of East-West Women (NEWW)** focuses on the status of women in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). NEWW coordinates research and advocacy that supports women's equality and full participation in all aspects of life. With members in more than 30 countries NEWW is among the largest networks in CEE. NEWW Poland serves as the Gender Watch secretariat.

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