

**Briefing file for Milena Angelova**

***“Embedding Mental Health and Gender Equity as prerequisite for a sustainable health workforce”***

***4 November, Brussels***

***9 – 10 h***

***Introduction***

***Esteemed healthcare professionals, ladies and gentlemen.***

It is with a profound sense of urgency and respect that I address you today. We gather at a pivotal moment, a moment that demands we confront the challenges facing our healthcare systems head-on. The sustainability of these systems, and indeed, the well-being of our societies, hinges on a workforce that is not only skilled and dedicated but also supported, valued, and treated equitably. To achieve this, together with other pressing measures, we must embed mental health and gender equality as non-negotiable prerequisites for a thriving healthcare workforce.

***Acknowledging the Sacrifices***

Let us first acknowledge the extraordinary dedication and sacrifices of our healthcare professionals, particularly highlighted during these past years. You have been the front line of defence, the pillars of hope in times of uncertainty. Your tireless efforts have saved lives, eased suffering, and sustained our communities. We owe you not only our gratitude but also our unwavering commitment to ensuring your well-being.

***The Crisis: A System Under Strain***

The EP works on an Own-initiative Report on ‘An EU health workforce crisis plan: sustainability of healthcare systems and employment and working conditions in the healthcare sector’ (to be adopted perhaps at the beginning of 2026). It depicts the stark reality, where our healthcare workforce is under immense strain. We are facing a projected shortfall of over four million healthcare workers by 2030. This is not merely a statistic; it represents a tangible threat to the accessibility, quality, and resilience of

our healthcare systems. And the reason? Not just demography and increasing needs, but workforce exhaustion, inadequate investment and systemic inequalities.

### ***Mental Health: A Foundation for Resilience***

The mental health of our healthcare professionals is the bedrock upon which resilient healthcare systems are built. We cannot expect individuals to provide compassionate, high-quality care if they are themselves struggling with burnout, stress, and a lack of support. This requires a paradigm shift: mental health support must be integrated into the very fabric of our healthcare systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the possible avenues for positive interaction between safe and healthy working conditions and public health. It also proved some occupations to be exposed to psychosocial factors that can increase exposure to stress and produce negative impacts. This proved the fact that, staff burnout and demographic changes threaten a permanent contraction in the European health workforce. Some professions are more exposed than others to precariousness and to risk of physical harassment, including unwanted sexual attention – e.g., workers in: health care (14.6 %), transport and communication (9.8 %), hospitality (9.3 %), retail (9.2 %). Such stressful events may cause mental issues and conditions and must be prevented.

Mental health should be recognised in all Member States as a serious topic that requires an adequate degree of attention and a holistic, coordinated, structured and human-centred response. Coercion, stigma, segregation and discrimination around mental health conditions need to be lifted. Appropriate funding for health services to address mental health problems is essential for those services to be made universally accessible and affordable. This includes investments in properly trained health care personnel in sufficient numbers. Adequate levels of pay, constant up-skilling and sufficient staffing levels would ensure enough attention and

time devoted not only to patients, but also to people seeking medical advice, opinion or treatment. The funding aspect, both in physical and social infrastructures in the health sector, should be better developed in the MAFF 2028-2034.

Together with this, tangible actions shall be taken in order to:

- **Prioritize Occupational Health and Safety:** Ensuring strict enforcement of regulations to protect healthcare workers from physical and psychological hazards.
- **Invest in Accessible Mental Health Services:** Providing confidential counselling, stress management programs, and peer support networks.
- **Promote a Culture of Open Dialogue:** Creating a workplace where healthcare professionals feel safe discussing their mental health concerns without fear of stigma or reprisal.

### ***Gender Equality: Empowering Our Greatest Asset***

We must address the persistent gender inequalities that continue to undermine the healthcare workforce. Women represent the majority of healthcare professionals, yet they often face systemic barriers to career advancement, wage disparities, and a lack of recognition for their contributions. This not only perpetuates injustice but also deprives our healthcare systems of the full potential of our workforce.

One specific aspect to be addressed is the gender bias in healthcare, due to a lack of research, male-centric education, misdiagnosis and under treatment. Ignorance of sex- and gender-based differences across medical disciplines easily leads to incorrect diagnosis or medication, because female symptoms differ from male symptoms, or because drug dosages are based on clinical trials which are mainly conducted on men. There is also a lack of research on female-specific conditions, such as endometriosis and menopause, and of gender-disaggregated data in

research making it difficult to understand the mechanisms behind health issues and hampering attempts to find an appropriate response to e.g. a higher risk of females developing long Covid. To avoid the negative impact of biased medicine on women's participation in the labour market, the EESC stresses that in all European health and pharmaceutical strategies, gender bias and sex- and gender-based differences must be taken into account and addressed. Moreover, the right of women to make autonomous decisions about their own body needs to be fully respected.

The EESC underlines that success in enhancing gender equality in a sustainable way lies in nurturing a life-long gender equality culture that goes through the whole life cycle and provides measures tailored to the specific characteristics and needs of every stage of life. Being a matter of culture, it cannot be brought about only by means of single policies and measures but requires recognition, ownership and constant commitment by all actors of society.

A Life-long gender equality culture must be cultivated starting from early childhood by setting an example for children in the family, and continuing through nursery and throughout all school stages. The Member States, through their education policy, shall swiftly enhance gender-neutral teaching with respect to both knowledge and social skills, as well as learning contexts free from gender stereotypes.

To sustain Life-long gender equality culture further, gender equality needs to be fostered in all economic and societal activities, including businesses, public services and political life. The EESC believes that keeping gender equality up systematically in various contexts is a necessary means of moving things forward, and calls for:

- The removal of any obstacles and provision of incentives for the overall participation of women in labour markets, irrespective of profession, task or age, is thus crucial. For example, flexible

working arrangements, parental leaves, and taxation, and other kinds of incentives play a role in enhancing gender equality. In addition to legislative frameworks, the practical modalities should be laid down using the possibilities of collective bargaining between the social partners.

- **Mentorship and Leadership Programs:** Supporting women in healthcare to advance into leadership positions.
- **Zero Tolerance for Harassment:** Creating a safe and respectful workplace free from discrimination and harassment.

### ***A Call to Action***

The way forward is clear: we must address workforce shortages by investing in education, training, and improved working conditions. Let us transform these recommendations into concrete action:

1. Increase EU funding for mental health support initiatives and gender equality programs within the healthcare sector.
2. Encourage Member States to implement national action plans with measurable targets for improving mental health and promoting gender equality in healthcare.
3. Strengthen the role of social partners and professional bodies in designing and implementing workforce strategies.

### ***Conclusion***

Esteemed healthcare professionals, it is high time to take action. Let us work together, with a shared sense of purpose and urgency, to create a healthcare workforce that is not only sustainable but also healthy, equitable, and empowered. By investing in the mental health and gender equality of our healthcare professionals, we are investing in the very foundation of our societies. Thank you.