

# STRENGTHENING PUBLIC SERVICES – A DOUBLE WIN FOR GENDER EQUALITY

EPSU briefing ahead of the 63<sup>rd</sup> session  
of the UN Commission on the Status of Women

WOMEN'S RIGHTS  
ARE WORKERS RIGHTS ♀





.....

The European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) brings together and represents the interests of over 8 million public service workers from 49 European countries. EPSU, also through its membership in the European Trade Union Confederation, and by being the European region of Public Services International, engages on European and global level to fight for better pay and working conditions for public service workers. Gender equality has been at the core of EPSU's work, with its Women's and Gender Equality Committee convening regularly. EPSU is therefore well-placed to contribute to the 63<sup>rd</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), with next year's session main theme being, amongst other things, access to public services.

.....





## MAIN MESSAGES

The quality of employment in public services and the quality, accessibility and affordability of public services provided are **strongly linked** - deficiencies in the former have a detrimental effect on the latter. Investing in public services in the right way is an imperative from a gender equality perspective, and it also **brings double gains**.

- 1) **Women make up the majority of workforce** in many public service sectors and therefore properly valuing the work done and workers in these areas (reflected by adequate salaries and working conditions, representation) is crucial to ensuring **decent work** and improving the well-being of the women (and men) employed in public services.
- 2) Doing so also has a positive impact on the **quality of services** (be it care, health care etc.) provided, and thus on **the lives of the public service users – women being at the forefront of them, as well**.
- 3) To achieve this, it is indispensable that the strengthening of public services happens in line with the values public services represent: **solidarity, equal access, democratic control**. Only **public investment** financed through **progressive taxation**, and not market-based alternatives (like public-private partnerships) can help realise redistribution that benefit women, create public goods, and provide decent wages and working conditions for women working in the sector.



## Public services as enablers of gender equality

Providing accessible, affordable, and high-quality services are key to improving gender equality. Care and social services help redistribute unpaid work and foster higher and more secure labour market participation of women, as stressed by the International Labour Organisation’s recent report on Care Work and Care jobs<sup>1</sup>. But the role of public services goes beyond this. Public provision of high-quality health care, of clean drinking water, or public administration services etc., and not market-based alternatives, helps contribute to multidimensional aspects of women’s welfare, and to countering female poverty by reaching the most marginalised. Universal access and universal provision of public services are crucial in this regard. A significant proportion of people reported obstacles in accessing even primary health care in Eurofound’s last Quality of Life Survey, with those from lower-income households particularly facing issues of distance, waiting time and affordability<sup>2</sup>.

Several gender equality indexes or gender-sensitive welfare indexes have also recognised the indispensable role public services play in achieving gender equality: the **ELGE’s Gender Equality Index** for instance looks at gender-differences in “unmet medical needs” as an indicator (stressing the need for accessible and affordable health services of high quality), whereas the **OECD’s Better Life Index**, for instance, incorporates water quality, pollution, and safety as indicators (pointing to the significance of services in this regard) and is then disaggregated by gender.

*“Ensure that adequate investments are made to strengthen efforts through, inter alia, the allocation of resources to provide quality, accessible and affordable public services, including education, health and other social services which incorporate gender equality as a basic principle” (Conclusions of 53<sup>rd</sup> Session of the CSW, 2009)*



## Public services as decent work places for women

Women constitute the majority of public service workers. Work in female-dominated sectors and occupations is often not properly valued, reflected in lower wages<sup>3</sup> (and a gender pay and pension gaps as a result), poorer and more insecure working conditions (and, as a result, differences in access to **social protection** and access to training and career development), fragmented representation and lack of voice. Due to their over-representation among public service workers, women were also hit first and hardest by recent austerity measures across several European countries, be it pay cuts, freezes, or downsizing, with effects (including on the gender employment and pay gap) felt even years after the financial crisis<sup>4</sup>.

Improving the quality of public service employment ensures that the work of women in the sector is properly valued and contributes to workers' economic independence. This must entail and be manifest in guaranteeing **equal pay for work of equal value, tackling precarious work among (female) public service workers, properly valuing women's skills and work, and guaranteeing right to representation and collective bargaining.**

*"(...) women constitute the majority of those employed in the health and social sectors, that by working in those sectors they make important contributions to sustainable development, and that investments in those sectors could enhance women's economic empowerment and transform unpaid and informal care roles into decent work by improving their working conditions and wages and by creating opportunities for their economic empowerment through skills enhancement and career advancement."*  
*(Conclusions of the 61<sup>st</sup> session of the CSW, 2017)*



## Public services=public investment

Strengthening public services, however, will only lead to more equality for both users and workers if there is commitment to do so through the funding, way of financing, design, and the monitoring of public services.

- The equalising effect of public services should be strengthened (and not offset) by the way these services are financed: through fair and progressive taxation, which includes taxation on profits, environmental damage done, and should entail fighting against corruption and tax evasion to increase the available fiscal space to finance high-quality, affordable and accessible public services.
- Vast research shows that services provided by public actors lead to better societal outcomes than private companies' and that outsourcing or privatisation of public services does not necessarily bring efficiency gains, either<sup>5</sup>. The 2018 European Court of Auditors' special report on EU PPPs indicated short-comings in efficiency, cost increases, and recommended that PPPs should not be promoted until a range of concerns are properly addressed<sup>6</sup>.

The UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, in his recent report, drew attention to the detrimental impact privatisation of basic goods and services has on human rights, and critiqued actors who had widely promoted it, without consideration for the poor and marginalised<sup>7</sup>.

- The evaluation of investment in services should take into account a vast range of indicators and not solely focus on short-term cost-effectiveness which drives down the quality and accessibility of, and the pay and working conditions in public services. People and the values represented by public services, including gender equality, cannot be costed and are not commodities.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that the agreed conclusions of the 63<sup>rd</sup> UN CSW recognise:

- The crucial role of increased public investment in public services for increased gender equality, and the link between quality of employment in public services & quality of public services provided,
- The recent austerity measures' detrimental impact on gender equality through worsening quality of public services and public service employment,
- The necessity of tackling low pay and working conditions in public service sectors dominated by women, and its implications for the (closing of the) gender pay & pension gap, and
- The role collective bargaining and social dialogue can play in all of this.

**Women's Rights are Workers' Rights!**

**Prague Statement, 2018**

## REFERENCES

- 1 Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work, International Labour Office – Geneva: ILO, 2018
- 2 Eurofound (2017), European Quality of Life Survey 2016: Quality of life, quality of public services, and quality of society, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, p. 53
- 3 EPSU Report “She works hard for the money - tackling low pay in sectors dominated by women”, Torsten Müller, ETUI (June 2018), p.16 [https://www.epsu.org/sites/default/files/article/files/She%20works%20hard%20for%20the%20money\\_0.pdf](https://www.epsu.org/sites/default/files/article/files/She%20works%20hard%20for%20the%20money_0.pdf)
- 4 EPSU report on Cuts in public sector pay and employment: the ongoing impact on women in the public sector, Labour Research Department (February 2016) [https://www.epsu.org/sites/default/files/article/files/Impact\\_of\\_cuts\\_Women.pdf](https://www.epsu.org/sites/default/files/article/files/Impact_of_cuts_Women.pdf)
- 5 See EPSU report “Public and private sector efficiency”, PSIRU, September 2014 <https://www.epsu.org/sites/default/files/article/files/Public%20and%20Private%20Sector%20efficiency%20EN%20fin.pdf>
- 6 European Court of Auditors (2018): Public Private Partnerships in the EU: Widespread shortcomings and limited benefits. [https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR18\\_09/SR\\_PPP\\_EN.pdf](https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR18_09/SR_PPP_EN.pdf)
- 7 Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston (2018). For the Seventy-third session of the UN General Assembly. Agenda item 74 (b). <http://undocs.org/A/73/396>





FIGHTING FOR A FUTURE  
**FOR ALL**  
10<sup>TH</sup> EPSU CONGRESS 2019  
4-7 JUNE 2019, DUBLIN

**EPSU is the European Federation of Public Service Unions.** It is the largest federation of the ETUC and comprises 8 million public service workers from over 260 trade unions across Europe. EPSU organises workers in the energy, water and waste sectors, health and social services and local, regional and central government, in all European countries including the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood. It is the recognised regional organisation of Public Services International (PSI). For more information please go to: [www.epsu.org](http://www.epsu.org)