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## Beijing +25: Women's\* rights and gender equality in Switzerland

Although great progress has been made in the area at the legislative level, equality between men\* and women\* in Switzerland remains an issue. Article 8 of the Federal Constitution states that everyone is equal and that no person may be discriminated against because of their gender, amongst other things. The Gender Equality Act was introduced in 1996 and Switzerland adopted the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women\* (CEDAW) in 1997. Switzerland also ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women\* and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) in 2017. Nevertheless, gender-based disadvantage and discrimination continue to affect people's everyday lives and present legal and structural problems. Despite repeated demands from politicians and NGOs, Switzerland does not yet have a national equal opportunities strategy, and various institutions that promote gender equality at the national or cantonal level have been downgraded or even disbanded.

**Gender role stereotyping** remains widespread in Switzerland, and strategic participation in tackling this problem — for instance, through vehicles such as the media or awareness-raising in schools — is still lacking. Thanks to their considerable outreach, these would be ideal channels for projecting a different picture and presenting alternatives to traditional role models.

**Career choice** is another area that continues to be heavily influenced by socially established norms. Although the Vocational and Professional Education and Training Act, which sets out equal opportunities as one of its stated objectives, has been in force for many years now, the Federal Government has yet to launch a project that specifically promotes the achievement of gender equality at every educational level. Similarly, many cantons have still not embedded the issue in their education laws.

Another area in which women\* face discrimination is the **world of work**. Women\* remain poorly represented in senior management roles. In addition to being paid less than their male\* colleagues, more than half of all

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women\* are employed part-time, putting them at a disadvantage in terms of further education and training and social security. Moreover, many women\* are entrapped in what is referred to as “precarious employment”, in jobs in low-wage sectors that lack security. This is particularly true of women\* affected by multiple discrimination and women\* with disabilities.

**Childcare issues** also play a major role here. Despite the introduction of national minimum standards a few years ago, in reality a number of gaps remain in relation to both maternity allowance and the debate surrounding paternity or parental leave, which is still in its infancy. The same applies to out-of-home childcare, which is much more expensive in Switzerland than in neighbouring countries. Furthermore, many women\* in Switzerland find it impossible to balance family and work life without incurring huge financial disadvantages. In Switzerland too, the face of poverty is female, with single mothers, older women\* and large families being disproportionately affected. This trend is boosted by various rules in relation to children’s rights and divorce law that frequently have an adverse impact on women\*.

**Equal participation in politics** has not been implemented at either cantonal or national level, despite having been widely discussed for many years.

**Gender-based violence**, particularly violence against women\* (including trafficking in women\* and forced marriage), remains a pernicious reality in Switzerland. Once again, it is women\* affected by multiple discrimination and girls\* who are most badly affected. This trend is less visible at the judicial level, where much has been achieved in recent years, but more so in terms of practical implementation.

When it comes to **migration**, women\* tend to be severely affected, as female\* migrants more often than not find themselves employed in underqualified jobs, with any skills or qualifications they have gained back home not being recognised either. In legal terms, these women\* are often in a defensive position, whether in relation to domestic violence or their residence status. Unlike the costs of abortion, contraceptives are not included in the catalogue of benefits covered by mandatory health insurance — a fact that makes female migrants an especially vulnerable group. The same applies to access to reproductive health care. Efforts to improve the health of this especially vulnerable segment of the population must therefore take centre stage, as women\* from a migrant background are often socially isolated and financially and linguistically dependent on their husbands or relatives. In addition to these socio-economic factors, language difficulties and the lack of available information in many languages are key. A low level of education, stressful work situations and a possibly irregular or unclear residence status are all factors that cause a deterioration in the health of mothers and children from a migrant background.

**Women\* and girls\* with disabilities** in particular frequently experience multiple forms of discrimination, as evidenced by the following: their social security inequality; stereotyping in the public consciousness and in relation to career choices; lower levels of employment but more precarious work compared with women\* and men\* without a disability; the greater likelihood of their being affected by violence; discrimination with regard to sexuality and family planning; and a lack of opportunities for empowerment and participation in the political process.

**Transgender and “gender identity”** are not referred to by name in either the Federal Constitution or any of its cantonal equivalents. This lack of protection stands in blatant contradiction to the discrimination, stigmatisation and violence these people face in their everyday lives.

### **Recommendations**

1. Constant awareness-raising among the authorities, competent bodies and the wider public is crucial. This requires both a national gender equality strategy and a gender mainstreaming process that also addresses the issue of preventing and overcoming multiple discrimination.
2. Voluntary measures are not enough in themselves to achieve equality in a whole variety of areas (political office, key business leaders...). Special action is called for, such as quotas (e.g. quotas for women\* in political office or on corporate boards) and statutory regulations (e.g. paternity or parental leave), if the goals set long ago are finally to be realised.
3. As well as increasing the financial resources available to the Federal Office for Gender Equality (FOGE) and its cantonal counterparts, their political position and sphere of influence must be strengthened.
4. Switzerland needs a national action plan against domestic and gender-based violence, specifically against violence towards women\* and girls\* who are particularly vulnerable to and affected by multiple discrimination.