



## **LOBBY EUROPEEN DES FEMMES EUROPEAN WOMEN'S LOBBY**

Mr Kofi A. ANNAN  
Secretary General of the UN  
United Nations  
United Nations Plaza  
New York, NY 10017

Brussels, 4 February 2003

Dear Mr. Annan,

### ***Stop the Global Backlash against Women's Human Rights***

The European Women's Lobby, (EWL), brings together over 3.000 women's organisations in Europe working together to achieve equality of women and men, and to ensure that gender equality and women's human rights are taken into consideration in all areas of European Union policy.

As we look forward to the 47<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, we wish to draw to your attention our deep concern about developments in recent years at UN conferences. It is our view that women's human rights have been undermined by representatives of governments with a fundamentalist agenda under the guise of upholding "cultural and religious values".

During the 1990s, a number of groundbreaking decisions were made relating to women's human rights, reproductive rights and rights of access to services. The human rights framework is reflected in several internationally agreed documents, for example in the Vienna Declaration (§ 5, 1993) and in the Beijing Platform for Action (§ 9, 1995). At the conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994 the UN confirmed that a human's right to sexual and reproductive health is a fundamental human right.

These decisions are now being challenged by powerful well funded coalitions made up of government representatives with traditional beliefs and fundamentalist religious leaders. Traditionalists are opposing women's reproductive rights and access to services, as well as attempts to combat male violence in the world. The EWL considers these developments as a major backlash against women globally the aim of which is to erode and undermine women's human rights and in particular a woman's right to control what happens to her own body.

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2002, many EWL member organisations were present and witnessed the attempts by representatives of certain Christian and Muslim fundamentalist groups to challenge women's rights in the health paragraph of the Outcome Document. (§ 47). This health paragraph included references to national laws, and to cultural and religious values, without reference to human rights and fundamental freedoms. The paragraph was modified on the summit's last day.

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The final text reads that health services are to be delivered “in conformity with human rights and fundamental freedoms and consistent with national laws and cultural and religious values”. It is understood by many that references to “cultural and religious traditions” are among other things, being used as a cover for female genital mutilation, forced and child marriage, honour killings and death by stoning.

EWL considers a woman’s right to bodily integrity as a basic human right and a prerequisite for democratic legitimacy as well as sustainable development. The full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms of all women is essential for the empowerment of women.

I trust that you will share the concerns raised by EWL and we ask that the United Nations

- make a public statement condemning these developments
- reaffirm it’s commitment to the full realisation of women’s human rights
- take active measures to stop this backlash wherever it seeks expression and in particular in the forthcoming Commission on the Status of Women.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Lydia la Rivière-Zijdel', written over a horizontal line.

Lydia la Rivière-Zijdel

President of the EWL

**cc:**

Ms Alice Marangopoulou, Adviser to the Prime Minister of Greece

Commissioner Anna Diamantopoulou, European Commission - Brussels

Ms Ana Karamanou, Chairperson of the Women’s Rights Committee - Brussels

Ms Carolyn Hannan, Director Division for the Advancement of Women, New York

Ms Angela King – United Nations, New York