Equality between women and men - 2008

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The Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality adopted the own initiative report by Iratxe **GARCÍA PÉREZ** (PES, ES) welcoming the Commission's 2008 report on equality between women and men. It reiterates the two-fold nature of policy on equal opportunities for women and men at EU level, on the one hand ensuring equality between women and men in all policy areas (gender mainstreaming) and, on the other hand, targeted measures to curb discrimination against women, including awareness-raising campaigns, the exchange of best practice, dialogue with citizens and public-private partnership initiatives.

MEPs outline areas where improvements should be made:

Combating violence against women:MEPs stress the importance of combating violence against women to achieving equality between women and men and call on the Member States and the Commission, therefore, to undertake concerted action in the field. They urge the Commission to consider the possibility of new measures on combating violence against women. The Union is called upon to create a clear legal basis for combating all forms of violence against women, including trafficking, and to take a decision on the full communitarisation of policies on combating trafficking in human beings and on the related topics of immigration and asylum.

Women in the decision-making process: reaffirming its criticism that overall participation of women in decision making at local, national and EU levels are insufficient, the committee invites the Commission, Member States and political parties, to consider action to improve the situation, in particular the use of electoral quotas on the representation of women. Similar actions should be promoted in civil society activities, trade unions and NGOs.

Gender mainstreaming: MEPs call on the Commission and Member States to take the necessary measures to implement gender mainstreaming in all social, employment and social security policies, in particular in the flexicurity strategy, and to combat all forms of discrimination.

Gender pay gap: MEPs are concerned about the lack of progress as regards the gender pay gap between women and men. The Union is urged to assess the strategies and actions in this area and to establish, where necessary in cooperation with the social partners, any new measures or new approaches in implementation of existing measures, to improve the situation. They support the suggestion of the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities to render existing European legislation on the subject more stringent by inserting a requirement for employers to conduct wage audits and draw up action plans in order to close the pay gap. MEPs stress the need for concerted action, especially in the context of the new cycle of the European Strategy for Growth and Jobs, and for common principles of flexicurity. They also call on the Community institutions and the Member States to make 22 February 'International Equal Pay Day'. They call on the Member States to support the Commission in its monitoring of the implementation of national measures to assess respect for the principle of equality, particularly as regards legal entitlements and pension and social security regimes.

Gender stereotypes: MEPs believe that if gender stereotypes are to be banished from the media, and egalitarian behaviour models fostered in industry and in the home, the right values will need to be inculcated through schooling, starting at an early age. Appropriate measures are called for (see the parallel initiative on the same issue INI/2008/2038 on how marketing and advertising affect equality between women and men) to tackle stereotypes at all levels of education and employment, to raise the awareness and participation of the media, civil society….

Women and science: MEPs propose that the Commission consider adopting measures to encourage women to study scientific and technological subjects and to take further measures to improve women's access to and participation in the labour market, especially in sectors such as high-technology, research, science and engineering, in which they are still under-represented. The European Structural Funds should be used to achieve this.

Female spouses of self-employed workers: MEPs call on the Commission and the Member States to examine the situation of spouses participating in the activities of a self-employed worker. The Commission is requested to amend Council Directive 86/613/EEC on the application of the principle of equal treatment between men and women engaged in an activity, including agriculture, in a self-employed capacity, and on the protection of self-employed women during pregnancy and motherhood. Female entrepreneurship in the industrial sector should be promoted and financial support and vocational guidance structures for women setting up companies should be provided.

Vulnerable groups of women: MEPs consider that priority should be given to vulnerable groups of women, in particular disabled women, women with dependants, elderly women, minority and immigrant women and women prisoners, and to develop targeted measures to meet their needs.

Reconciling family and professional life: the committee points out that any policy on the reconciling of work and family life must be based on the principle of free personal choice and adapted to different life cycles. Proposed actions aim to:

- improve the legislative and non-legislative frameworks for reconciling professional, family and private lives (relating to maternity leave and its inclusion in aggregate working time, parental leave, paternity leave, adoption leave and care-for-dependant leave);
- put forward specific measures to combat inequalities between women and men caused by interrupted patterns of employment resulting in particular from maternity leave or leave to care for dependants, and to reduce their negative effects on careers, wages and pension entitlements;
- promote male involvement in the implementation of gender equality policies, especially in the field of reconciling work, private and family lives;
- include flexible family policy measures in firms' workforce-management plan to make it easier for employees to return to work after a career break.

Better implementation tools to measure the progress of equality: MEPs urge the Member States and regional and local authorities to ensure the effective use of existing tools, such as the manuals for mainstreaming equal chances for women and men in employment policies produced by the Commission. They ask the Commission, with the help of the European Institute for Gender Equality, to include facts and statistics from candidate and potential candidate countries in future annual reports on equality between women and men.