Equality between women and men in the European Union — 2009

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PURPOSE : to present the 2009 report on equality between women and men.

CONTENT : the European Commission reports each year on progress towards gender equality and presents challenges and priorities for the future. 2008 was the midpoint for the implementation of the Roadmap for Equality between women and men, as well as Member States' implementation of the European Pact for Gender Equality.

The report states that shared efforts have produced positive results, particularly as regards female employment, but **overall progress is still too slow** in most areas and gender equality is far from being achieved.

This report addresses the challenges and the policy responses for removing barriers to women's and men's full participation in the labour market. It also addresses the importance of correcting the gender imbalance in decision-making. Although the economic slowdown has changed the context, it is important to continue to strengthen gender equality policies.

Main developments:

- **gender gaps:** female employment in the EU is now close to the Lisbon objective of 60% by 2010, having increased from 51.1% in 1997 to 58.3% in 2007. However, there are major differences between Member States, with figures varying from 36.9% to 73.2%. The average gap in employment rates between women and men is narrowing. However, if one compares the employment rate of women and men with children under 12 to care for, this gender gap is almost doubled. In the EU more than 6 million women in the 25 to 49 age group say they are obliged not to work or to work only part-time because of their family responsibilities. **Better reconciliation of work and private life for both women and men is essential** to achieve gender equality. The report states that the development of affordable and quality childcare facilities is vital for enabling both parents to combine work and family life.
- **education:** women accounted for 58.9% of university degrees in the EU in 2006 (56.7% in 2004). However, gender differences remain as regards the fields of study, especially in engineering and computing while women predominate in business, administration and law (60 %). Women are still lagging behind men in the use of new technologies and have difficulties in accessing more specialist ICT-related jobs. Women's high level of education is not directly reflected in the positions they hold in the labour market. A **better gender balance across studies and occupations** could contribute to meeting future skills and labour market needs;
- **gender pay gap:** one of the consequences of gender segregation on the labour market is the persisting gender pay gap (17.4% on average in the EU), partly due to the fact that women are concentrated in less valued jobs and positions than men. Women are more at risk of falling into poverty, and more vulnerable in times of rising unemployment since they are more often on fixed-term contracts than men.
- **high level positions:** the number of female managers in the EU has remained stable over the last few years, averaging 30%, and figures are even lower in a majority of Member States. The proportion of women directors of top quoted company boards is 3% across the EU, while one in ten company board members is a woman. This is paradoxical when female students outnumber male in business, administration and law.
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- **politics:** the average share of women members of national parliaments increased from 16% to 24% between 1997 and 2008, but national figures range from 9% to 46%. In national governments, one out of four senior ministers is a woman, but variations between Member States range from 0 to 60% female ministers. There has been some progress within the European Institutions, but women are still underrepresented in top positions. Only three out of ten members of the European Parliament are women.

Policy and legislative developments: one of the main initiatives in 2008 for achieving gender equality was the adoption by the European Commission of several measures aiming at supporting better work- life balance:

- amendment of Directive 92/85/EEC on maternity protection (increasing the minimum maternity leave from 14 to 18 weeks);
- strengthening the provisions of Directive 86/613/EEC for self-employed workers and 'assisting spouses' in family businesses;
- following a two-stage consultation by the Commission, the social partners started negotiations on family-related leave other than maternity leave..

The report goes on to describe: i) equal participation of women and men in political decision-making; ii) initiatives to achieve equal treatment between women and men (monitoring the implementation of Directives 2002/73/EC and 2004/113/EC); iii) reviewing the adequacy of EU current legislation on equal pay to tackle the gender pay gap.

Policy orientations: amongst the actions which the Commission envisages in the short to medium term, the report highlights the following :

1. encouraging equal sharing of private and family responsibilities between women and men: the main measures will be as follows :

- the development of affordable, accessible and quality care services for children and other dependants. The potential of the Structural Funds and EAFRD should be fully utilised ;
- reconciliation policies need to allow for individual choices for both women and men as regards flexible working and leave arrangements. Measures such as paternity leave can encourage men to share parenting and other care responsibilities equally with women;
- reconciliation policies need to be implemented at all levels in the workplace, so that a more equitable use of women's and men's time becomes the norm;
- the proposals reviewing the two directives on maternity leave and rights of self-employed women need to be adopted swiftly by the legislator.

2. tackling stereotypes: combating gender stereotypes means tackling the root cause of persisting gender gaps in the labour market. The Commission proposes measures to:

- remove discriminatory practices and attitudes from educational material and methods, teaching and vocational guidance;
- strengthen measures for training and awareness-raising at the workplace;
- encourage the media, including the advertising industry to transmit non-stereotyped images and content, in particular of women in decision-making positions.

3. promoting equal participation of women and men in decision-making positions: investing in gender balance in business and management can improve corporate governance and profitability. The Commission proposes the following :

- the promotion of equality in decision-making needs stronger commitment and partnership at all levels: governments, regional and local authorities, political parties, social partners, business managers, human resources teams, NGOs, educational institutions, media, men and women ;
- specific policies and measures, including where appropriate positive action, equality plans, mentoring and targeted training. All appointments, recruitment, job and skill evaluation, salaries and promotion should be transparent and gender-unbiased;
- improve the collection, analysis and dissemination of comparable data existing at EU level broken down by sex;
- encourage political parties and European and national parliaments to take specific measures to involve more women and improve the balanced representation of women and men on voting lists and in nominations for elected offices.

4. creating higher awareness and better understanding of gender equality: more and better communication should create awareness and make gender issues more visible and understandable at all levels of society. The report proposes:

- to reinforce gender mainstreaming by intensified training and capacity-building for those involved in policy-making;
- to develop gender statistics and indicators based on existing data, including the integration of a gender perspective in policy analysis and monitoring;
- to improve knowledge and understanding of gender issues at all levels of society.

Next steps: in view of the contribution that gender equality can make to growth, employment and social cohesion, the Commission invites the European Council to urge the Member States to respond without delay to the challenges outlined in this report by reaffirming their commitment to integrating the gender dimension in all policy fields in partnership with the social partners and civil society.