Role of women in an ageing society

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The Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality adopted an own-initiative report drawn up by Sirpa PIETIKAINEN (EPP, FI) on the role of women in an ageing society in response to the Commission Communication on 'Dealing with the impact of an ageing population in the EU)' (COM (2009)0180).

It welcomes the Communication but regrets that the definitions, statistics and situations considered are not sufficiently based on an awareness of gender inequalities in older age, which result mainly from accumulated gender-based disadvantages during a whole lifetime. Members call on the institutions to create a more positive attitude towards ageing and they urge the Commission to launch a study on the potential of the silver economy in which older women are active subjects.

Tackling age discrimination: Members want the anti-discrimination directive to be adopted as soon as possible. They recognise that age discrimination must also be tackled with more effective judicial measures, especially in cases of discrimination in working life where specific legislation exists and where support for the individual and investigation of the circumstances are essential. The committee also calls for a more rights-based approach to ageing so that older people can act as empowered subjects instead of objects. It asks for the development of existing monitoring mechanisms, as age discrimination is seldom recognised and tackled, and greater awareness in Member States is needed.

Reconciling work and care: Members calls for the introduction of new types of leave that make it possible to take paid leave for caring duties other than parental leave, and promote a more equal division of unpaid care between women and men. One way to reduce poverty amongst older women is to support arrangements, such as part-time work and job-sharing, which provide the option of flexible working. However, the committee stresses the need to ensure that the employment rights of flexible workers must be equal to those of full-time workers and that the accumulation of pension rights is sufficient even during those times when the income level of a carer is temporarily lower due to caring duties, a situation which mainly concerns women. The Commission is asked to launch a study on the different impacts that pension systems in Member States have on women and men.

Health, care and social services: the report calls for a rights-based approach to enable older people to play an active role when decisions are made on the choice and the design of the care and social services and treatments whenever options exist. It also calls also for a demands-based approach with regard to the provision of any type of care services in order to enable older people to live independently for as long as they wish. Furthermore, Members feel that a comprehensive support policy is needed for informal carers, the majority of whom are women, encompassing their status, benefits and social security rights, the provision of social services and support services, availability of professional care services, etc.. Volunteer work or informal care that often rests on women's shoulders should not make up for social care deficiencies.

Members go on to point out that the quality of care should be ensured in order to improve the quality of old age and also in order to avoid the physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse that is often inflicted on the elderly. People living in institutions for elderly care should have the right to participate in the decision-making of these institutions through board and administration structures.

Members also propose that statistical surveys be carried out on the increase in violence against elderly people with the aim of casting light on this serious problem – which elderly people are normally incapable of reporting, since they may accept the ill-treatment they suffer as part and parcel of being old and dependent – and with a view to combating elder abuse more effectively.

Lastly, with a view to preventing older women from becoming excluded from society, the report calls for targeted cultural and educational schemes to be set up and for older women to be involved in local community initiatives.

Moving ahead: the committee asks the Commission to propose by the end of 2011 an action plan containing:

- an examination of the need for more resources for scientific research on ageing,
- measures to ensure the quality of care and the quality of the working conditions of carers,
- changes to increase coherence in the area of social security, including pension schemes, care leaves and part-time working arrangements,
- a gender-sensitive concept of age-related diseases and measures for their optimum recognition and treatment,
- yearly reporting, based on the principles of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and managed by the Fundamental Rights Agency at the institutional level and national agencies in the Member States, on the violation of older people's rights and on measures to be taken at EU and national level to abolish direct and hidden discrimination,
- non-legislative measures to tackle age discrimination, such as awareness-raising campaigns,
- mainstreaming of the perspective of older migrants and LGBT people,
- measures to support intergenerational solidarity, such as plans to support women who care for grandchildren while the parents are absent due to employment reasons,
- measures to make use of the knowledge and professional experience of older people, for example by setting up associations of older people to provide advice for job-seekers,
- exchange of best practice.

Lastly, the committee affirms that every man and woman in the EU must have a right to affordable and quality social and health services of general interest, according to their specific needs and preferences. It asks the Commission to put forward a directive on basic services, which would take national conditions into consideration. It emphasises that older women are especially vulnerable and invites the Commission to consider a system where all men and women in the EU are granted the right to a basic income that is dependent on the Member State's standard of living.