Face of female poverty in the European Union

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The Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality adopted the own-initiative report drafted by Rovana PLUMB (S&D, RO) on the face of female poverty in the European Union.

Feminisation of poverty: the report recognises that “the feminisation of poverty” means that women have a higher incidence of poverty than men, that their poverty is more severe than that of men and that poverty among women is on the increase.

The report states that 17% of all women in the EU’s 27 countries are classed as living in poverty. Women are traditionally at greater risk of poverty – especially single mothers and women aged over 65. Female poverty is not only the result of the recent economic crisis but the consequence of various factors including stereotypes, existing gender pay gaps, barriers caused by the lack of reconciliation between family and work life, the longer life expectancy of women and, in general, the various types of gender discrimination, victimising mostly women.

Members call for:

- the mainstream of the concept of gender equality in all employment policies and special measures so as to improve access to employment, avoid over-representation of women in precarious employment;
- integration measures and social protection measures, in the light of the ‘Europe 2020’ flagship initiative on combating poverty and social exclusion, and in response to the European Parliament’s resolutions on the same issue;
- the adoption of a gender-specific perspective as a key component of all common policies;
- the strengthening of the European strategy on social inclusion and protection and to step up efforts to improve the situation of single parents;
- the taking into account of the gender dimension in their plans for recovery from the recession by promoting and boosting the employment of women and adopting specific measures for initial and ongoing training, targeted inclusion in the labour market, flexible hours, wage equality and the review of tax and pension systems, as well as to adjust budgets to ensure equality of access to public-sector expenditure;
- the strengthening of their commitment and take specific measures to eradicate poverty and combat social exclusion putting specific emphasis on the most vulnerable groups (single-parent households, families with three or more children, disabled people, ethnic minorities, especially the Roma, people living in the most disadvantaged microregions, people with decreased work capacity and young people without work experience);
- elderly women with diseases typical of their age to have access to preventive and diagnostic medicine;
- gender policies and EU principles to be applied at all levels, locally and nationally.

Combating women’s poverty through labour policies and social protection: Members call on the Member States for specific programmes to promote the active inclusion or **reintegration of women on the labour market** and for specific opportunities for life-long training. In the interests of not adding to the insecurity experienced by women on the employment market, Members call for family responsibilities to be taken into account when selecting employees for dismissal, bearing in mind that in many situations women have custody of children.

The committee considers **active employment policy** very important in preventing poverty and a process in which social partners play an essential role. It stresses the need to establish a **transparent regulatory framework for atypical forms of employment** in order to ensure proper working conditions and decent pay, given that finding employment is a motor for combating poverty.

Moreover, Members call for the following actions to be made:

- provide appropriate social benefits for women and men who take care of elderly, sick or disabled relatives, and for elderly women, who receive particularly small pensions;
- revise the existing legislation relating to the application of the principle of equal pay for men and women;
- eliminate gender inequalities in employment as part of the EU 2020 Strategy and strongly encourage establishing as an objective the reduction of the gender pay gap by 1% each year, in order to achieve a target of 10% reduction by 2020;
- set up counselling centres to identify and combat the exploitation of women workers, which is one of the main causes of poverty and social exclusion;
- consider **reviewing taxation and social protection systems** with a view to individualising rights in pensions and social security schemes in order to eliminate the 'breadwinner advantage', guaranteeing equal pension rights and removing incentives that adversely affect women's labour-market and social participation;
- develop and implement as a matter of urgency a strategy to **halve child poverty by 2012** and break the spiral of poverty in general;
- facilitate single parents' entry into and return to the labour market, as well as welfare arrangements for single-parent families;
- review their immigration policies in order to dismantle structural obstacles to full labour market participation by migrants.

Furthermore, the report calls on the Commission and Member States to identify, adopt and monitor specific gender indicators in the field of poverty eradication and the promotion of social inclusion. It stresses the need to develop appropriate employment integration and training policies at national level, together with special tax arrangements for one-parent families, as part of the fight against poverty, child poverty and social exclusion.

The report call on the Commission to closely examine obstacles to social participation such as energy poverty, financial exclusion and obstacles to accessing information and communication technology (ICT). It also stresses the importance of coordinating policies to fight unemployment and social exclusion at all levels of government in order to combat poverty effectively.

Reconciliation of family life and work by women who live in poverty or are exposed to the risk of poverty: the report calls on the Commission and the Member States to take the necessary measures to promote the reconciliation of work and private life, in order to enable women who are exposed to the risk of poverty to pursue their careers in full time work, or to provide access to part time work and other flexible work arrangements, including by means of reversible part-time work arrangements during periods spent as carers. Recognising that one-third of single-parent families in Europe are living in poverty, Members call on the Member States to improve accessibility, in particular through financial support for childcare, and to improve public childcare facilities and provide firms with incentives to set up in house facilities. Other measures include: (i) the adoption of additional support measures, especially for working mothers who are members of single-parent families; (ii) taking targeted action to ensure that women in a disadvantaged environment have fair access to public health systems; (iii) developing appropriate measures to support teenage mothers.

Combating poverty among older women: the report stresses that the risk of falling into poverty is greater for women than for men, particularly in old age. Given that social security systems are based on the principle of continuous remunerated employment, Members point out that, in some cases, women do not fulfil this requirement because of interruptions to their work and that they are penalised because of discrimination on the labour market, in particular because of the wage gap, maternity leave and part-time work, or as a result of taking a break from or stopping work to take on family responsibilities. Members calls on the Member State governments to give recognition to the bringing up of children and ensure that this period counts towards a pension, thereby enabling women to benefit from **full pensions.** The report calls for the participation of women of all ages in lifelong training programmes to be facilitated and that adequate pensions for women should be ensured.

Impact of gender based violence on the risk of poverty: given the gravity of violence against women in the EU, the report once again calls on the Commission to establish a European Year for combating violence against women. Members call on the Member States to: (i) record, analyse and study the factors which lead to domestic violence so that policies can be developed immediately to prevent and deal with the consequences of such violence; (ii) take the necessary measures to e**liminate customary or traditional harmful attitudes and practic**es, including female genital mutilation, early and forced marriages, and honour crimes; (iii) establish national plans to combat all forms of violence against women and ensure the highest standards of legislation with regard to combating male violence against women; (iv) provide adequate funding for the support and protection of victims of violence; (v) take gender-specific measures to address issues which are not only linked to income poverty, but which relate to culture, social and political participation and social networks.

Social dialogue and civil society in fighting women's poverty: Members stress the importance of a structured social dialogue in fighting women's poverty. They point, in this regard, to the need to improve systems for taking part in, and collaborating with, women's organisations, other NGOs and relevant stakeholders and civil society in general. They call on the Commission to maintain the financial allocation that may be used among civil society organisations in fighting and curbing the effects of women's poverty.

Ensuring funding as a means to combat poverty: lastly, Members emphasise the importance of the structural funds, in particular the European Social Fund, as a key tool for assisting Member States to combat poverty and social exclusion. They call on the Member States for more co-funded actions to give greater support to services such as care facilities for children and for elderly and dependent persons. They stress that the regulations on the ESF should be **revised and changed** to reach those who need it most and that visibility and transparency should be enhanced. They call for targeted funds to be earmarked, within the new budgetary framework, for job creation and social inclusion. The report stresses, moreover, the need for the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) Regulation to be amended to enable, as with the European Social Fund (ESF), proactive measures to be taken in support of women in the 2014-2020 programming period.