Poverty: a gender perspective

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The Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality adopted the own-initiative report by Maria ARENA (S&D, BE) on poverty: a gender perspective.

The Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, exercising its powers as associated committee under Rule 54 of the Rules of Procedure, was also consulted and gave an opinion on this report.

The latest Eurostat data show that the number of women in poverty remains permanently higher than that of men, with currently some 64.6 million women as against 57.6 million men. Women were particularly affected by the risk of poverty in the EU-28 in 2014, with the rate standing at 46.6% before social transfers and 17.7% after such transfers. Regardless of how specific the groups at risk are, such as elderly women, single women, single mothers, lesbians, bisexual women, transgender women and women with disabilities, poverty rates among migrant women and women from ethnic minorities are the same throughout the EU. Furthermore, single-parent families are at greater risk of poverty or social exclusion (49.8 % compared with 25.2% of average households with dependent children, with, however, differences between Member States.

Members also recalled that the austerity policies requested by the Commission and implemented by the Members States, in addition to the economic crisis of the past few years, have widened inequalities and affected women in particular.

Poverty and work-life balance: recalling the crucial role of high-quality public services in combating poverty, especially female poverty, Members considered that Member States should **prioritise the issue of reconciling private and professional life** by introducing family-friendly working arrangements, such as adaptable working hours and the possibility of teleworking.

Deploring the austerity policies being pursued by the EU, the committee called on the Member States and the Commission to develop and use the available policy and financial instruments, including the Social Investment Package (the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI).

It asked the Commission, in close coordination with the Member States, to undertake a **comprehensive and global legislative initiative with a view to meeting the needs of mothers and fathers** concerning the different types of leave, namely maternity, paternity, parental and carers' leave, in particular in order to help men play an active role as fathers. Members reiterated their disappointment at the withdrawal of the maternity leave directive and called for a move towards the individualisation of rights in social equity policy.

Poverty and work: Members called on the Commission and the Member States to implement policies to promote the employment of women and the integration into the labour market of socially marginalised groups of women. They called particularly for the development of affordable and high-quality public care services, adaptable but not precarious working-time arrangements that benefit both women and men. Noting that women are more often employed in precarious and low-paid work and on non-standard employment contracts, the committee called on Member States to step up their efforts to combat undeclared work, precarious jobs and the abuse of atypical forms of contract, including zero-hour contracts in some Member States. They pointed out that there are new categories of women in poverty, consisting of young professional women, especially in certain Member States whose tax policies do not take into account the difficulties encountered by these categories, (the 'new poor').

Members reiterated their call on the Commission to revise the existing legislation in order to **close the gender pay gap and reduce the pension gap between men and women** and recommend a definition of work of equal value, taking into account ECJ case law, in order to ensure that factors such as working conditions, the responsibility conferred on workers and the physical or mental requirements of the work concerned are taken into account.

Poverty: general recommendations: Members made a series of recommendations for fighting poverty amongst women:

- develop support schemes and social pricing for the most deprived in society, particularly in regard to water and power supplies;
- combat gender stereotypes, empowering women and girls in the social, economic, cultural and political fields;
- actively promote a positive image of mothers as employees and to combat the phenomenon of the 'motherhood penalty' as identified by a number of research studies;
- ensure that the structural and investment funds, are used to improve education and training with a view to improving labour market access and combating unemployment, poverty and social exclusion of women;
- incentivise the achievement of equal representation in areas where there is a gender imbalance;
- take urgent measures in the field of migrant education both at EU and national levels, bearing in mind that education is key to integration and employability;
- ensure that all young people have access to high-quality free public education at all ages, including early childhood;
- ensure equal treatment legislation to combat poverty resulting from marginalisation and discrimination affecting sexual and gender minorities;
- take additional measures to support divorced women prone to discrimination and poverty;
- promote best practice on taxation policies that takes gender impact into account and furthers gender equality;
- include gender-specific considerations when designing a guideline reference budget;
- ensure determined efforts to combat domestic violence, particularly against women;
- improve the quality of life of women in rural areas;
- improve women's access to culture and social participation;
- take specific measures to help disabled women;
- strive towards establishing a European Child Guarantee that will ensure that every European child at risk of poverty has access to free healthcare, free education, free childcare, decent housing and adequate nutrition;
- introduce new individual indicators in respect of women and poverty, as a tool to monitor the impact of broader social, economic and employment policies on women.

At the same time, Members asked the Commission and Member States to create stakeholder engagement processes that promote and facilitate the direct engagement of persons at risk of poverty and social inclusion, particularly women and girls, in policy-making on social inclusion at all levels. NGOs which operate successfully in areas afflicted by extreme poverty should be mobilised as should social partners (trade unions and employers) and civil society.