Creating labour market conditions favourable for work-life balance

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The Committee on Employment and Social Affairs and the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality adopted the joint own-initiative report by Tatjana ŽDANOKA (Greens/EFA, LV) and Vilija BLINKEVIIT (S&D, LT) on creating labour market conditions favourable for work-life balance.

Members recalled that in 2014, 5.1 million children were born in the EU-28, corresponding to a crude birth rate of 10.1. In comparison, this rate was 10.6 in 2000, 12.8 in 1985 and 16.4 in 1970. Hence, the EU faces a serious **demographic challenge** owing to the ever-decreasing birth rates in most Member States.

In this context, Members felt that well designed and well-implemented reconciliation policies might greatly promote economic growth, competitiveness, overall labour market participation, gender equality, reduction of the risk of poverty, and positively influences birth rates in the EU.

Reconciliation of professional and private life as a fundamental right: Members pointed out that reconciliation of professional, private and family life is a wide-ranging concept that embraces all overarching policies of a legislative and non-legislative nature aimed at promoting appropriate and proportionate balance between the various aspects of people's lives. Reconciliation of professional, private and family life needs to be guaranteed as a **fundamental right for all**, with measures being available for everyone, going beyond young mothers, fathers or carers.

Members called for the introduction of a framework to **ensure this right as a basic aim of social systems** and called on the EU and the Member States to promote, in both the public and private sectors, business welfare models respecting the right to a work-life balance.

To meet the challenges of unprecedented demographic changes, Members called on the Commission and the Member States to put in place positive policies and incentives to support demographic renewal, preserve social security systems and promote the well-being and development of people and of society as a whole. They felt it was necessary to **promote family-friendly working environments,** reconciliation plans, return-to-work programmes, communication channels between employees and employers, and incentives for businesses and self-employed workers, in particular to ensure that people are not economically penalised for having children.

Measures to promote reconciliation: the committee called for legislative and non-legislative measures regarding the reconciliation of professional, private and family life. The Commission was called upon to put forward a proposal for such a package as part of the Commission Work Programme 2017. Members stressed that legislative proposals should include **equality between men and women** as a legal basis.

These measures should include **provisions that support those who are most disadvantaged or currently excluded from existing legislation**, such as single parents, unmarried couples, same-sex couples, migrants, self-employed people or so-called 'assisting spouses', and families in which one or more members have a disability. **The well-being and best interests of children** should be one of the primary considerations.

Reconciliation and gender equality: Members underlined that a better work-life balance and strengthened gender equality is essential for supporting the participation of women in the labour market. They called on the Commission and Member States to develop transformative policies and to invest in

awareness-raising campaigns to overcome gender stereotypes and to promote a more equal sharing of care and domestic work. Member States should step up protection against discrimination and unlawful dismissal related to work-life balance.

Furthermore, the lack of comparable, comprehensive, reliable and regularly updated equality data makes it more difficult to prove the existence of discrimination. Members called on the Commission to take initiatives to further promote such data collection and establish relevant indicators in this area.

Governance and reconciliation: the committee considered it necessary that adequate training on non-discrimination legislation in employment and case law be provided for employees of national, regional and local authorities and law enforcement bodies, and for labour inspectors. It called on Member States, together with the Commission, to guarantee that rights to social entitlements assigned by public policies are equal in terms of individual rights and equally accessible for women and men, in order to ensure that everyone can enjoy their rights and to enable them to achieve a better work-life balance.

Women and men as equal earners and equal carers: Members called on Member States to put in place proactive policies and appropriate investment designed to support women and men entering, returning to, staying and advancing in the labour market, after periods of family and care-related types of leave. They also urged Member States to **replace household unit models by the individualisation of taxation and social security rights** in order to ensure that women have individual rights and to counter dependency status through their partners or through the state.

Family- and care-related types of leave: noting that the Commission has withdrawn the revision of the Maternity Leave Directive, Members called for an ambitious proposal with high-level standards, in order to ensure a better work-life balance. The Commission and Member States must ensure that women are paid and covered by social protection for the duration of maternity leave.

The Commission should also propose:

a paternity leave directive with a minimum of a compulsory two-week fully paid leave;

a carers' leave directive which supplements the provision of professional care, enables workers to care for dependants and offers the carer adequate remuneration and social protection;

minimum standards applicable in all Member States to address the specific needs of adoptive parents and children and to establish the same rights as for natural parents.

Care for dependants: the report called on Member States to examine the possibility of gradually **bringing school hours into line with full-time working hours**, by means of free out-of-school activities both at the end of the school day and in school holiday times, in order to help workers achieve real balance between their working, family and private lives. It also called on Member States to support **fiscal policies** as a powerful lever enhancing work-life balance and to foster employment of women, by introducing **a tax credit for child care and care of elderly or other dependants based on fiscal incentives and benefits.**

Quality employment: Members pointed out the high levels of working poor throughout Europe, with some people having to work more and longer, even combining several jobs, in order to earn a living wage. They pointed out that work-life balance must be based on workers' rights and security on the labour market, and on the right to take time off without it being curtailed by increased mobility and flexibility requirements. In this context, they supported '**smart working'** as an approach to organising work through a combination of flexibility, autonomy and collaboration, which **does not necessarily require the worker to be present in the workplace** or in any pre-defined place and enables them to manage their own

working hours, while nevertheless ensuring consistency with the maximum daily and weekly working hours laid down by law and collective agreements.

Members went on to point out that excessive and irregular working hours and insufficient rest periods are major factors in increased levels of stress, poor physical and mental health and occupational accidents and diseases.

They called for measures to increase '**quality of life'**, which refers to the overall well-being of individuals in a society. In this context, they called on Member States to promote measures aiming to put in place **adequate minimum income schemes**, in line with national practices and traditions, to enable all people to live a life in dignity, to support their full participation in society and to ensure independence throughout the life cycle.