Care services in the EU for improved gender equality

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The Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality adopted an own-initiative report by Sirpa PIETIKÄINEN (EPP, FI) on care services in the European Union for improved gender equality.

Work/life balance - context: the limited possibilities to cost-effectively, efficiently and flexibly combine paid work with family responsibilities are some of the main reasons for labour market inactivity for women. The average employment rate for women in the EU is 64% (compared to 76% for men). Women are also over-represented in part-time jobs.

The increasing demand for care, the widespread nature of informal care in Europe and the pressure on public spending in some countries renders informal care even more important in the future. **Care services** should be defined as including childcare and early childhood care, as well as care for the elderly and for people with disabilities.

Data indicate that **80% of care in the European Union is provided by unpaid informal carers, 75% of whom are women**. A quarter of women still fall into the category of unpaid family workers, as their work does not result in the payment of a salary. Women are over-represented in sectors that are generally characterised by low wages, long hours and often informal working arrangements, resulting in lower earnings for women than for typical male workers.

Members expressed their concern at the unfavourable developments in **parental leave** and parental rights, as evidenced, for example, by the withdrawal of the draft directive on the extension of maternity leave. They called on the Commission to close the gaps in EU legislation. They welcomed the Commission's proposal for a Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers and underlined in this respect the importance of individual rights to leave and working time arrangements to help workers organise their private and professional lives.

The Member States are invited to:

- **encourage fathers to make the best use of paternity leave** and thus encourage them to assume their responsibilities towards their children and families and to contribute to genuine equality between men and women;
- **ensure equal access to and treatment of care services** for the elderly, children and people with disabilities or chronic diseases who need long-term care, with particular attention to people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Quality, affordability and accessibility of care: Members believe that care services must be designed to provide real choice for all users, their family members and caregivers, whether they work full time or part time or are self-employed or unemployed.

The Commission is called upon to **develop guidelines** for Member States on the development of comprehensive care services that are accessible, employment-friendly, person-centred and community-based, which include childcare services and services for the care of the elderly and people with disabilities, and which are based on the participation and consultation of the users to whom these services are addressed. The Commission should serve as a platform and promote the exchange of experience and good practice on the quality, accessibility and affordability of care services.

Concerned about working conditions in many healthcare institutions, Members called on Member States to **upgrade personal services as a career** and ask the Commission to define a legal framework establishing **minimum standards for workers** in this sector, in collaboration with the social partners.

Member States are, among other things, invited to:

- launch an initiative on the quality of long-term care taking inspiration from the available civil society-led voluntary tools and initiatives;
- ensure and monitor that institutions and other places that provide care are safe and motivating settings in which to work;
- introduce "care credits" through labour and social security legislation to protect people who stop working to provide informal, unpaid care to care to a dependent or family member;
- ensure that informal caregivers are fully recognised as equal actors in care service provision.

The Commission is invited to present to the Council for approval a **European Carers' Programme**.

Care and funding objectives: Members called for the development and monitoring of quality of care **indicators** at European level and for the inclusion of care for the elderly and people with disabilities or chronic diseases in its monitoring and data review within the framework of the European Semester.

The report encouraged Member States to give priority to funding childcare and long-term care services using the **financial instruments** available in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), in particular EFSI and the European Structural Funds, so that the level and quality of the services targeted can be achieved in all EU Member States. Member States should report on the use of these funds using sufficiently disaggregated data so that the information can be analysed at European level.