The role of cooperatives in the growth of women's employment

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The Committee chaired by Nel van DIJK (Greens, NL), adopted the report on this subject by Maria Paola COLOMBO SVEVO (EPP, I). The aim of the report is to determine, in qualitative and quantitative terms, the contribution cooperatives can make to boosting employment among women. It attempts to identify new sources of jobs in sectors which meet society's new needs and working arrangements (e.g. the services sector). The growing interest in the "third sector" or "social economy" has given rise to the "social economy firm" (which has been made official in Italy by the 1991 law on "social cooperatives" and in Belgium with the 1995 law on "sociétés à finalité sociale"). These cooperatives occupy a prominent position in the social economy, as a result of historical tradition and their distribution in industry. They are distinguished by the fact that they often provide: -services for less-favoured groups; -public services with a particular social value; -consumer protection; -participation for consumers in the management of the firm. The committee believes that cooperatives can create jobs for women in the services sector, since they: -convert traditionally female skills and experience into a business asset; -can facilitate the integration and/or reintegration into the labour market even of poorly-qualified women or women without work experience, often following a period of absence for family reasons; -can represent a stage in a woman's career, which may be used as a basis for redeployment to other sectors; -make it easier to reconcile work and family life and, at the same time, provide high-quality, affordable services. For these reasons, the report calls on the Commission: -to strengthen the legislative framework of the "social economy firm" and to provide the necessary financial resources; -to set aside specific funds under the ESF for the provision of appropriate training geared to new skills and occupations; -to allow the application, on an experimental basis, of a reduced rate to "third system" services which are labour-intensive and create jobs, particularly for women. The report also specifically addresses the Member States and calls on them to provide for the following: -specific measures with regard to the social economy in their annual action plans; -financial and tax incentives.