Women and poverty

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report by its chair, Anna ZÁBORSKÁ (EPP-ED , SK), on women and poverty. The report looked at four main areas: the development of gender-based indicators and methodology, so as to measure the differing impact of poverty and social exclusion on women and men; the importance of involving poor women and families at all levels of decision-making; measures to improve the balance of family life and work in a disadvantaged environment; and the contribution of civil society.

MEPs emphasised that "poverty has various manifestations", including a lack of income, ill-health, limited or non-existent access to education, unsafe environments and social discrimination and exclusion. They added that poverty was also characterised by lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social and cultural life. Moreover, extreme poverty situations were conducive to trafficking in women, to prostitution and to violence. These consequences of poverty should also be taken into account in the open coordination method and in the Social Policy Agenda.

The report deplored the fact that the EU had failed to tackle adequately the "feminisation of poverty", and called for a close partnership with the poorest women and families to be forged at all levels of the decision-making process so that policies could be tailored to their real needs. The Commission and the Member States were urged to involve social partners at local and regional level, whose members include rural women living on the edge of poverty, in social dialogue on the development and implementation of education, employment and pension policies.

MEPs stressed that the risk of falling into poverty was greater for women than for men, particularly in old age, given that most social security systems are based on the principle of continuous remunerated employment. Many women did not fulfil this requirement because of interruptions in their work, due to the unbalanced distribution of paid and unpaid work. The Member States were urged to ensure that appropriate social security is made available for women responsible for the care of sick, elderly or disabled members of their families and for elderly women who receive a particularly low pension. MEPs also called for effective ways of fostering a balance between work and family life for men and fathers as well, "given that the increased participation by women in the labour market has not been accompanied by a commensurate increase in male involvement in family responsibilities".

Lastly, the report called on the Member States to make a greater effort to improve the availability of social services, and paid tribute to the work of voluntary organisations committed to working with the most disadvantaged groups.