Women and poverty

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The European Parliament adopted the resolution based on an own-initiative report drafted by Anna **ZÁBORSKÁ** (EPP-ED, SK), on women and poverty.

Indicators and methodology: Parliament stressed that poverty and social exclusion cannot be understood solely in economic terms, on the basis of figures, but must also be understood in terms of human rights. Poverty has various manifestations, including a lack of income, hunger and malnutrition, ill-health, limited or non-existent access to education and other basic services, increasing mortality, unsafe environments and social exclusion. In this context it is also characterised by a lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social and cultural life. Extreme poverty gives rise to trafficking in women, to prostitution, to violence and more generally to exploitation of all kinds. Parliament called for these consequences of poverty also to be taken into account in the open coordination method and in the Social Policy Agenda. Parliament called for the following:

-the Commission and Council must recognise the informal economy and quantify the 'economics of life' using gender-specific approaches;

-Eurostat must develop a methodology and indicators broken down by gender, with a view to measuring the impact of poverty and social exclusion on women and on men;

-a study be carried out into the effects which the economic and political transformation undergone by the new Member States has had on the actual situation regarding equality between men and women;

-records to be kept of the cases of women who belong to minority groups and who work with no social security and pension rights, and to help them integrate smoothly into the labour market.

Partnership with the poorest women: Parliament deplored the fact that, despite the political will shown to combat poverty and social exclusion through Community strategies, the Union has failed adequately to tackle the issue of the feminisation of poverty. There must be measures to promote a close partnership with the poorest women and families, so that the means for combating chronic poverty effectively can be drawn from their experience. All the institutions concerned must adjust the open coordination method and the operational framework for the Social Policy Agenda to the needs of women in situations of poverty.

Balancing family life and work by those living in poverty: Parliament stressed that access to high-quality employment, including reasonable and fair remuneration, is the only way to avoid and combat poverty. Part-time work and low-quality employment, which affect mostly women, contribute to the increase of women amongst poor workers. There is a direct link between economic inequality and female dependency and the inequalities still existing between men and women in terms of access to education, family responsibilities and the general upkeep of a family. Parliament expressed indignation at the fact that (despite legislation which has been in existence for decades yet is still ineffective) the pay gap between the two sexes stood at 16% in 2001 and 15% in 2003. Unpaid work, which is mainly performed by women, is not systematically recorded in national statistics and is, therefore, not taken into account when employment policy is drawn up by the competent national and Community bodies. Parliament called on the Commission and the Member States to compile data relating to unpaid jobs with a view to promoting measures for a fairer distribution of those jobs. In addition, Member States are asked to ensure fair access by men and women to social security and pension systems, while allowing for career breaks and part-time working. They should also ensure that in pension-insurance subsystems the principle of equal treatment and social justice is applied consistently, in informal sectors, in order to guard against the

pauperisation of the elderly, with specific reference to women. In most Member States, social welfare systems do not take sufficient account of the specific conditions of women living in poverty. The risk of falling into poverty is greater for women than for men, particularly in old age, where social security systems are based on the principle of continuous remunerated employment. Women often do not fulfil this requirement because of interruptions to their work and that they are penalised because of discrimination on the labour market.

Parliament also called on the Member States to devise effective ways of fostering a balance between work and family life for men and fathers as well, with due respect for their national legislation, 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.

Contribution of civil society: Parliament commended the daily struggle by the poorest women against extreme poverty and the work performed by those who assist and support them on a voluntary basis. Member States must make a greater effort to improve the availability of social services, in view of the fact that the availability of high-quality social services providing care for children and other family members determines whether or not the groups which are at greatest risk (i.e. women who are the heads of single-parent families) are able to work. NGOs and civil society organisations were commendedby Parliament.