

Equality between women and men in the European Union

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report drawn up by Edite ESTRELA (PSE, PT) in response to the Commission's 2004 annual report on equality between women and men in the EU. It pointed out that, although the Commission's report described significant legislative developments in the Member States, it avoided mentioning shortcomings in transposition or indeed actual violations of Community law, and did not contain any analysis or evaluation of the current situation. The Commission was accordingly urged to carry out a study into how Member States implement Community legislation in the area of equality, particularly with regard to employment and access to and provision of goods and services, and to take appropriate action in the event of failure to comply with the relevant Community 'acquis'.

MEPs highlighted the need to narrow the pay gap between the sexes, which was estimated to be around 15% for the Union of 25. They called on the Member States, acceding and candidate countries to provide statistics on the gender pay gap in all areas of work and to pursue "more vigorous and extensive" measures to implement EU legislation aimed at reducing this gap. Moreover, it was important to ensure that pension schemes were not discriminatory against women and that they did not reinforce existing patterns that already place women at a disadvantage in terms of benefits and contributions. The committee also stressed the importance of avoiding gender segregation in the labour market and urged the Member States to encourage young women to pursue studies in non-traditional fields.

The report underlined the need for "appropriate measures" to support the reconciliation of work and private life for working women, for example by providing facilities for the care of children, elderly people and dependents and by devising more flexible working conditions. It reminded Member States of the commitments agreed by the European Council in Barcelona in 2002 to introduce, by 2010, childcare for 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age, and for at least 33% of children under 3 years old, and urged them to put forward similar targets for facilities for the care of elderly and sick relatives.

Pointing out that women were under-represented in political decision-making bodies throughout the EU, and that in some of the present and future Member States the percentage of women parliamentarians was below the worldwide average of 15.6%, the committee called for a review of structures and procedures in both national and European-level political parties with a view to removing all barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against the participation of women. There was a need to adopt "adequate strategies" to achieve a better balance of women and men in elected assemblies.

Lastly, the report stressed that gender equality and gender mainstreaming called for "political commitment at the highest level". It also recommended better coordination between the EU's mainstreaming policy and the Lisbon strategy in order to take better account of the gender perspective in fulfilling the ambitious objectives set out in Lisbon.