Mid-term assessment of the Lisbon strategy from a gender perspective

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Edite **ESTRELA** (PSE, PT) on the future of the Lisbon strategy from a gender perspective. (Please see the summary of 21/11/2005.) To recall, the Lisbon European Council set the objective, to be achieved by 2010, of an employment rate of 60% for women. The Stockholm European Council added an intermediate objective, for the end of 2005, of a 57% employment rate for women, and added an objective of a 55% employment rate for all older workers, both male and female. The recitals in the report recall some significant statistics: there has been a slight increase in the employment rate for women, which reached 55.1% in 2003 in the enlarged European Union, but the rate of increase has since slowed down. The new jobs created for women are generally precarious and badly paid, In the enlarged EU, the average pay gap is 15%, but this rises to as much as 33% in some countries. Women's level of education tends to be higher than that of men (58 % of university graduates and 41% of PhD graduates are women).

Parliament voiced its concern at the continuing disparities between women and men, particularly as regards the pay gap, access to employment, segregation on the employment market, and access to post-university education, lifelong training, new technologies and the information society. It called on the Member States to maintain their efforts in promoting quality employment for women of all age groups and in all sectors, and take more effective measures to promote a growth in employment for women, particularly in the poorest regions of the EU. This will help to put to good use the knowledge and skills acquired by women during their training, boost the viability of pension schemes, enable women to become financially independent and self-sufficient and ensure that they have their own satisfactory pension rights.

Parliament recommended better coordination between the policy of an integrated approach to equality between women and men, and the Lisbon Strategy, in the interests of taking systematic account of the gender perspective in realising the ambitious Lisbon objectives, particularly in the "broad economic policy guidelines", the "employment guidelines", environmental policy and internal market policy. It was regrettable that, up to now, collaboration for the purpose of achieving the Lisbon objectives had essentially been between governments. Parliament stressed that national, regional and local administrations, local authorities, businesses, educational and scientific institutions, the social partners and the whole of civil society must be involved.

The Member States must make the issue of reducing the pay gap between women and men an absolute priority on their political agenda and in their economic development strategy. Parliament called on the Member States to take initiatives to promote women as entrepreneurs. It stressed the need to improve the training of women in new technologies and increase their participation in research and technology programmes, which will enable them to become more competitive on the labour market and will reduce the current gender gap in technological and scientific skills. Parliament also recommended that the Member States adopt measures to ensure the most disadvantaged women, especially single parents, a "guaranteed minimum income", enabling them to live with dignity and to have access to professional training in line with the needs of the labour market.

The reorganisation of working time must result in a free choice for women. Parliament recalled that part-time working as an imposed solution can result in social exclusion and poverty. The rational implementation of part-time work practices would enable women who so wish to enter the employment market and to move within it, and would make it easier for them to combine a career and a family.

The Commission was asked to make reconciling work and private life one of its priorities in the roadmap for equality between women and men, which is currently under discussion, and to revise Directive 96/34 /EC with regard to its adequacy and effectiveness. The review should focus on how to ensure that work and family life are reconciled, for both men and women, which could be a fundamental factor for achieving gender equality in all walks of life.

Parliament criticised the Member States for not having implemented properly the established quantified objectives for the establishment of day-care facilities as agreed upon by the Barcelona Council. Members States must provide childcare to at least 90% of children between 3 years of age and the start of compulsory schooling and for at least 33% of children under three in both urban and rural settings.

Parliament was concerned about the inadequate means of subsistence for older women, women belonging to ethnic minorities and women with disabilities, which means that they must seek jobs in an economy where the unemployment rate is high. It called on the Member States to take their situation into account in national action plans and to consider any legislative provision allowing discrimination on grounds of age null and void. Member States must continue their efforts to modernise their social protection systems with a view to bringing them into line within a system in which as many women are employed as men, with the same career potential and pension rights as men.

Finally, Parliament felt that Member States should take effective measures for the benefit of men, such as promoting appropriate systems of parental leave and organising awareness-raising campaigns with the aim of greater investment by men in the equitable division of family responsibilities. In this connection, more use should be made of the flexible organisation of working hours and new forms of employment which make it possible to reconcile professional, family and private life. It deplored the fact that men do not make sufficient use of the organisation of working time and new forms of employment which allow professional, family and private life to be successfully combined.