Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Beijing +10: Review of progress achieved in the field of gender equality in Europe and in developing countries

(2005/C 221/11)

At its plenary session of 16 December 2004, the European Economic and Social Committee decided, under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, to draw up an own-initiative opinion on Beijing +10: Review of progress achieved in the field of gender equality in Europe and in developing countries.

The Section for External Relations, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 12 January 2005. The rapporteur was Ms Florio.

At its 414th plenary session held on 9 and 10 February 2005 (meeting of 9 February), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 135 votes to 1, with 6 abstentions:

1. Introduction

1.1 The 49th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), to be held from 28 February to 11 March 2005, will be concerned with reviewing the application of the Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration, which were approved at the 4th World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), and of the outcome documents approved at the 23rd Special Session of the General Assembly entitled ‘Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century’ (New York, 2000), which initiated a preliminary evaluation of progress made and obstacles faced in efforts to achieve gender equality.

1.2 At the 23rd Special Session, the General Assembly adopted a resolution of ‘Further actions and initiatives to implement the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action’ and a political declaration in which the Member States agreed to meet again 10 years after adoption of the platform to assess progress and consider new initiatives.

1.3 As provided for in the CSW multiannual programme, the work of the 49th Session will focus on progress made in the 12 areas defined in the Platform for Action and on identifying current challenges and new strategies for furthering the empowerment of women and children. In order to promote dialogue on this occasion the Assembly will allow broader participation of delegations from the Member States, civil society and international organisations.

1.4 The commitment of the United Nations has been crucial in putting the problem of gender equality on the international agenda. The First World Conference on Women was held in 1975, when the Decade for Women was declared (Mexico City). At the Second Conference (Mid-point of the Decade, held in Copenhagen in 1980), governments (57 initially) began signing the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979), which is one of the milestones on the long road towards gender equality. The Third Conference (Nairobi, 1985) approved the Plan of Action ‘Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women’, in which governments and international organisations proclaimed the objective of gender equality.

1.5 A further step in the process of recognising women’s issues and the role of women was UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security (which recognised that war has a different impact on women and reaffirmed the need to strengthen women’s role in decision-making processes relating to conflict prevention and resolution). More generally speaking, the advancement of women has been taken into account for more than ten years in the conclusions of all the major conferences and international meetings sponsored by the United Nations. (1)

1.6 Another important point was the United Nations Millennium Summit, held in September 2000, in which the Member States fixed eight clear and measurable objectives (Millennium Development Goals) to significantly reduce poverty, hunger, disease and environmental degradation by 2015. The Millennium Declaration was also a result of the need to draw up a

coherent list of priorities from those identified over the past ten years at the various conferences and summits held at international level. One third of the objectives have to do with promoting gender equality and empowerment of women, and are closely linked to education and training; one fifth concern reproductive health. However, gender issues cut across all eight goals.

2. General comments

2.1 Although the United Nations system has established an important legal framework for achieving gender equality, the practical application of principles within countries, and their trade and development policies, sometimes fall short of intentions on paper. Full achievement of civil, economic, social and political rights for women is in practice often threatened by macroeconomic policies and trade agreements based on neoliberalist principles that do not take any account of gender issues.

2.2 Furthermore, the complex international situation is certainly not a favourable environment for improving the situation of women, and there is a risk that gains made over previous years will be steadily eroded.

2.3 Current conflicts are further weakening and exacerbating the status of women.

2.4 Domestic violence is still a reality throughout the world and affects women of all ages, social classes and religions.

2.5 It is therefore important to reaffirm gender equality and the defence of women’s rights as a priority objective and means of achieving equitable development, better wealth redistribution, sustainable economic growth and strengthening of systems to protect the weaker sectors of the population.

3. Role of the Economic and Social Committee

3.1 It is important for the Economic and Social Committee to be involved, by drawing up a document of its own, in assessing the progress made by the European Union in relation to gender equality.

3.2 It should be noted here that the Committee has always taken a keen interest in activities aimed at improving women’s status, both through its many opinions and by promoting various initiatives itself. With specific reference to the Fourth Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) and its follow-up (Beijing +5) in particular, the Committee contributed two opinions (EXT/131 and REX/033), in which it highlighted, for example, the importance of a Committee delegation attending United Nations meetings.

3.3 In addition, in the context of cooperation with the European institutions — notably the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission — the Committee has taken on an important role in monitoring the numerous European Union initiatives to ensure gender equality, which represent an attempt over the past few years to meet the challenges and overcome the obstacles identified at Beijing.

3.4 In this sense we believe that — by reviewing progress made and obstacles encountered since the Fourth Conference — the Committee could make a valuable contribution to ensuring that women’s issues are systematically taken into account in an ever larger number of spheres of European policy and society.

3.5 Moreover, given that the European Union will have to take on a leading role at international level, with the heavy responsibilities this implies, we intend in this opinion to set out possible EU contributions to improving the living conditions and advancement of women throughout the world on the basis of its cooperation and trade and development policies.

4. The European Union

4.1 The issue of gender equality in the European Union, already present in the Treaty, was further codified with the Amsterdam Treaty, in which a ‘two-pronged approach’ was adopted that combined gender mainstreaming in all Community policies with the introduction of specific measures to improve the position of women. However, the question of equal opportunities for men and women had already been incorporated into the Community’s economic and social cohesion policy and was a key objective of the Structural Funds as far back as 1994.

4.2 The EU has adopted an integrated approach, distinguishing between legislative and financial instruments and using the open method of coordination in social policies. The most recently adopted instruments for achieving gender equality within the EU include the Framework Strategy on Gender Equality (2001-2005), together with the annual gender equality work programmes and the Structural Funds.

4.3 The Framework Strategy on Gender Equality (2001-2005) is designed to coordinate activities and programmes that were first developed on a sectoral basis, reflecting the two-pronged approach of Amsterdam, in order to improve coherence, e.g. by developing reliable indicators and a system for monitoring, evaluating and publicising the results achieved.
4.4 The strategy identifies five broad areas of action/objects, which are interlinked, for promoting gender equality: the economy (linked to the employment strategy and the Structural Funds, as well as the application of mainstreaming in all policy areas that have an impact on the position of women in the economy); participation and representation (linked to decision-making processes); social rights (linked to living conditions and disparities inherent in social protection systems); civil life (linked to basic human rights and freedoms, with particular emphasis on violence and sexual trafficking); changes in roles and stereotypes (linked to culture and the mass media).

4.5 Gender equality policies have also been stepped up using the Structural Funds. Provisions for the period 2000-2006 are based on a careful and critical analysis of measures to promote equal opportunities and of their weaknesses, and they incorporate the two-pronged approach laid down in the Amsterdam Treaty. In addition, the Structural Funds, and in particular the European Social Fund, have always been regarded as the main instrument of the European Employment Strategy. Under the new Employment Guidelines, adopted in July 2003, gender equality is a horizontal issue spanning all the objectives, and is also the subject of a specific guideline.

4.6 Considerable progress has been made within the European Social Fund, in relation mainly to employment and training policies. Efforts in this area have focused above all on improving women’s access to, and their participation in, the labour market (Axis E) and on ways of reconciling work and family life. There is already an encouraging track record of successes in this sphere. Thus the ESF has taken on board the quantitative objectives set by the European Council in Lisbon (2000), namely that female employment should increase from 51% (2000) to 60% by 2010, and by the Barcelona Council (2002), according to which pre-school education should be available to 90% of children between the age of three and the mandatory school age and to at least 33% of children under the age of three.

4.7 However, measures to improve the quality of work and career prospects, encourage women entrepreneurs, narrow the wage gap and promote women’s position in the new technology sector are only patchy. As regards the work/life balance some projects exist to improve childcare structures, but very few explicitly in relation to caring for elderly people or family dependants.

4.8 The gender dimension is still very modest in the other funds, especially those relating to agriculture and fisheries, sectors in which women are traditionally underrepresented, even though they play an active role in those sectors’ development. Thus there remain profound inequalities in such areas and women’s contribution to society is still undervalued, including in relation to improving environmental protection.

4.9 EU policies are backed up by various specific funding programmes and initiatives e.g. NOW (employment) for the labour market, STOP to promote cooperation to combat trafficking in women and children, DAPHNE to improve information and protection for victims of violence, and Women and Science (Research and Development Framework Programme) in the new technologies sector. The Framework Strategy is also intended to strengthen gender mainstreaming in various Community initiatives, such as Equal, Interreg, Urban, Leader as well as Leonardo, Socrates, Youth and Culture in the culture sector.

4.10 The Commission’s report on equality between men and women (COM(2004) 115) notes that a fairly sophisticated EU legislative framework already exists in this area (1), backed by extensive case law. A proposal is also being drawn up for a single directive on implementing the principle of equal treatment between women and men in the access to and supply of goods and services, which should consolidate and standardise the relevant existing legislation.

4.11 At their recent meeting during the Dutch presidency, the European Ministers for Employment and Social Affairs concurred, noting with respect to drawing up the single directive on equal treatment that the areas in which action was required above all were wage parity, equal access to jobs, equal treatment under social protection systems, training and career possibilities, and burden of proof in cases of gender discrimination.

(1) Directives on equal treatment for men and women with regards to: equal pay (75/117/EEC); access to employment, vocational training and promotion, and working conditions (Council Directive 2002/73/EC amending Directive 76/2007/EEC); social security (79/7/EEC); legal and occupational social security schemes (86/378/EEC), and self-employed workers (86/613/EEC); as well as the Directives on the health and safety at work of pregnant workers and workers who are breastfeeding (92/85/EC), the organisation of working time (93/104/EC), parental leave (96/34/EC), the burden of proof in cases of discrimination based on sex (97/80/EC), and part-time work (97/81/EC).
4.12 The proposal for a Directive implementing the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services (2003/0265 (CNS)) has also been examined by the EESC (1), which has identified certain major shortcomings that must be rectified without delay.

4.13 In addition, following adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action and in the wake of the Lisbon Council, more statistics on gender have been produced in the last few years, partly owing to the introduction of new indicators (e.g. on decision-making processes, the labour market or domestic violence) that allow problems to be effectively analysed and the impact of policies and measures to be monitored. Thus progress is already evident in relation to statistics even though much remains to be done if there is to be serious monitoring of the various spheres. The exact extent of progress made can only be ascertained if it is possible to examine and analyse quantitatively and qualitatively the phenomena and processes taking place.

4.14 On the other hand, gender budgets — i.e. application of gender mainstreaming to the budget procedure — are still virtually unknown at European level and in the Member States. Introducing the gender dimension at every level of budget planning is an acknowledgement that administrators’ decisions are not neutral but have different impacts on men and women; in this sense gender budgeting is also an instrument for evaluating the impact of policies, funding and taxation on men and women.

4.15 Unfortunately, although Community policies to support women have been stepped up, there is still a need for positive action and a supreme effort by the Member States to ensure that objectives are actually achieved, as they hold the chief responsibility for implementing these policies.

4.16 Although the female unemployment rate has fallen to 55.6% in Europe, the goal set by the Lisbon Council still seems distant in several countries. Women have swelled the ranks of the weakest category of workers, those in precarious employment, who often have no system of social protection. In many countries, wage discrimination between men and women persists or is worsening, and both vertical and horizontal segregation is still a lamentable reality. As already noted, even in relation to the work/life balance, measures appear to be focused exclusively on childcare; virtually nothing is being done to support care for other family members, and only a few countries have introduced measures to encourage parental leave for working fathers.

4.17 Considerable disparities also exist with regard to decision-making. Just consider that at EU level, the college of Commissioners of the European Commission comprises 22 men and seven women (only 24% of the total), while Parliament has 510 men and 222 women (only 30% of the total). Nor is the situation improving at national level: the average percentage of women in national parliaments is not even 25%, whereas in governments it barely exceeds 20%. (2) Women are also underrepresented in the EESC: of a total of 317 members only 79 (25%) are women.

5. The European Union and third countries: international cooperation and trade for the advancement of women

5.1 The problem of equal opportunities for men and women has now also been fully taken into account in European Union cooperation and development policies: Communication COM(95) 423 (18 September 1995), followed by the Council Resolution on integrating gender issues in development cooperation (20 December 1995) formed the basis for adopting an initial regulation in 1998 (Council Regulation (EC) No. 2836/98 of 22 December 1998), which has now been renewed for the period 2004-2006. The new text (No. 806/2004) strengthens the objectives — support for mainstreaming and adoption of specific measures to promote equal opportunities as an essential contribution to reducing world poverty — and identifies as priorities the monitoring of resources and services for women, especially with respect to education, employment and participation in decision-making processes. Support for public and private measures to promote gender equality is also emphasised.

5.2 The Programme of Action for the mainstreaming of gender equality in Community Development Cooperation (2001-2006) (3) is intended to help bridge the gap between stated principles and practice on the basis of a concrete strategy and definition of priority areas: support for macro-economic policies to reduce poverty and social development programmes in health and education; food safety and sustainable rural development; transport; institutional capacity building and good governance; trade and development, cooperation and regional integration; support for gender mainstreaming in all projects and programmes, both at regional and national level; and provision of instruments and appropriate training in gender equality issues for European Commission staff.

(1) European Commission data, Employment and Social Affairs DG, data as at 29/9/2004
(2) COM(2001) 295 final
(3) See Opinion ...
5.3 The Programming Document for 2005 and 2006 promoting gender equality in development cooperation identifies the following priority areas for action: promoting positive attitudes and behaviour among adolescents to combat violence against girls and women; and the need for training and methodological support for key stakeholders in partner countries.

5.4 The European Commission supports action and projects to improve gender equality through bilateral and regional cooperation with the western Balkans, eastern Europe and Central Asia, the Mediterranean, Africa, the Caribbean and the countries of the Pacific and Latin America. Other financial support is allocated on a thematic, rather than geographical, basis.

5.5 The Cotonou Agreement, signed on 23 June 2000 with the ACP (African-Caribbean-Pacific) countries, also marks an important point in the development of EU relations with third countries. This agreement — which demonstrates the link existing between politics, trade and development — introduces a social dimension, including by promoting full participation of non-government stakeholders, including civil society, in development strategies. Gender equality is also established as one of the cross-cutting issues of the agreement, and must therefore be systematically taken into account (Articles 8 and 31). A very positive development is that non-government stakeholders will now participate in the different phases of programming national strategic documents and we hope that particular attention will be paid here to including women’s organisations.

The agreement also gives the Committee an explicit mandate to advise economic and social interest groups, thus formalising its role of preferred interlocutor.

5.6 Achieving full inclusion and active involvement of women in development policies will certainly be a difficult and long-drawn-out process, but we believe it is important that all the European institutions maintain a high level of interest so that what has been set out on paper is translated into concrete measures.

5.7 From this perspective we think it is important for Community economic and social cohesion policies to be put forward as a model that can be exported to the rest of the world and for the EU to promote and apply the principles of social cohesion at international level through its relations with third countries.

5.8 One useful approach could certainly be to include specific clauses in trade and cooperation agreements, or even to adopt positive actions for those countries that respect women's rights.

5.9 Although trade liberalisation has certainly boosted female employment in developing countries, it is also often consigned women to the category of workers in precarious employment, less-skilled, less well-paid and without any system of social protection. In addition, trade liberalisation is often accompanied by structural reforms proposed or imposed by international organisations, which in the absence of adequate social protection mechanisms place a particularly heavy burden on the weaker sectors of the population — where women are often in the majority.

5.10 These policies, especially trade policy, nevertheless still seem to take little account of gender questions. Given that they are by no means neutral and that, on the contrary, they often have a negative impact on women in particular, and that the economic development of a country cannot neglect the issue of social equality, it would be useful if (1) such policies were negotiated taking gender mainstreaming into consideration, and (2) systems were introduced for monitoring their effects at macro- and micro-economic level.

6. Conclusions and work proposals

The effective cooperation now built-up by the European institutions has yielded significant results in terms of framing active policies to help women and of specific programmes and projects that have promoted women’s participation in the labour market, defence of their rights and improvement of their living conditions. The EESC notes that there remain many areas where action should be taken:

— The participation of women in decision-making processes and their representation is still too low, both in the European institutions and in the majority of Member States at national, regional and local level; it should be encouraged in all instances, and a quota system should also be considered.

— Training measures to promote gender mainstreaming should be introduced both in the institutions and in the Member States, at all levels from decision-making to policy and strategy implementation.

— Targeted studies and gender assessments, statistics, and specific indicators are essential for identifying issues, improving intervention strategies and policies, and for effectively evaluating their impact; it is necessary to continue producing de-aggregated data and defining new indicators.

— Resources earmarked for positive action in favour of women in all EU funds and financing instruments, and in the Member States, should be carefully quantified, above all by encouraging and promoting gender budgeting.
— The most important basic condition is, however, to ensure equal rights of access to education and training for women, as called for in Goal 3 of the Millennium Development Goals.

— With regard to the Structural Funds, measures to help women in the agricultural (EAGGF) and fisheries (FIFG) sectors should be stepped up and linked to environmental protection, another area in which Community gender-linked policies are rather weak.

— New impetus should be given to policies to encourage female entrepreneurship and increase the presence of women in the new technologies sector.

— Training activities in the knowledge-based society sector should be stepped up in order to ensure that this does not become another area of discrimination and exclusion for women, who in fact have much to contribute towards achieving the Lisbon Strategy objectives.

— More generally, further measures are needed in the labour market to combat vertical and horizontal segregation and to remove all obstacles preventing the achievement of true equality; Member States must identify specific, quantifiable targets and objectives with the agreement of the social partners. In relation to wage discrimination in particular, the Member States must start applying a multi-faceted approach, as provided for in the Council guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States (1), which includes education and training, job classifications and pay systems and cultural stereotypes as basic dimensions of the problem.

— In measures designed to reconcile work and family life more attention must be paid to providing care for elderly relatives, partly in view of the ageing of the population, without diminishing childcare provision.

— In order to promote equal opportunities between men and women, investment in public services should be encouraged and improved, especially in school and university education, healthcare and welfare services.

— Immigration and asylum policies and policies to promote the integration of migrant women, as well as measures to help women who have been victims of conflict, discrimination and violence in their country of origin, should be stepped up, also within the Member States.

— Efforts should be made to combat the trafficking of women and children.

— As far as trade and development policies are concerned, it is necessary to build on the policy of involving society in general and the role of women in particular; women’s interest groups must be fully involved in framing development policies and drawing up national strategy documents in the countries concerned; it is also particularly important to increase specific funding for women, so as to boost their economic and social position.

— The effects of trade agreements and development policies must be monitored, including at microeconomic level, by providing for specific analyses of gender differences into account.

— The role of the Commission and its delegations must be enhanced so that they can be influential in ensuring respect for human rights and thus also respect for women when their rights have been violated.

— Delegations should be given a specific responsibility for promoting mainstreaming of gender issues.

— The European Union should bring all its influence to bear in persuading as many countries as possible to ratify and implement international treaties that have a positive impact on the status of women, especially the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Optional Protocol, and in ensuring that the reservations lodged by signatory countries are withdrawn.

The Committee intends to look more closely into the state of women’s rights in the EU’s new Member States.

In view of the Committee’s role, its brief in relation to civil society, its objectives and the experience gained through ongoing monitoring of issues relevant to gender equality, it would also be useful for it to be represented on the European Commission delegation at the 49th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.


The president
of the European Economic and Social Committee

Anne-Marie SIGMUND