Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on The family and demographic change

(2007/C 161/19)

The European Economic and Social Committee received a letter, dated 19 October 2006, from the future German presidency requesting its opinion on The family and demographic change.

The Committee Bureau decided to draw up an opinion which would also address the Communication from the Commission — The demographic future of Europe — From challenge to opportunity, COM(2006) 571 final, on which the Commission decided, on 12 October 2006, to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 22 February 2007. The rapporteur was Mr Buffetaut.

At its 434th plenary session, held on 14 and 15 March 2007 (meeting of 14 March), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 120 votes to one with five abstentions.

1. Recommendations and proposals

1.1 Reacting to an unprecedented situation

1.1.1 Article 33 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights legitimises the European Union’s involvement in the debate on family policy, even if it is clear that, for reasons of efficiency and subsidiarity, the practical definition and implementation of policies must lie with the Member States, the local authorities and even public services and businesses.

1.1.2 In its Green Paper of 16 March 2005, the Commission rightly described Europe’s present demographic situation as ‘unprecedented’. The Communication of 10 October 2006 emphasises that ‘it is also one of the main challenges that the European Union will have to face in the years to come’. Statements of fact will not suffice. The only pertinent question is ‘what action should be taken at Community level?’ especially in the sphere of family policies and the reconciliation of family and working life. We should also stress that even the Council of Europe has recently joined the call for a broad European family policy.

1.1.3 The European Economic and Social Committee advocates a research programme, information campaign, proposals and monitoring. Generally speaking, impact assessments, which are now mandatory for all legislative proposals, should cover the impact on families if the latter are liable to be directly affected. These studies should be linked to the other broad socio-economic fields of action in the EU (employment, growth, energy evolution and its consequences).

1.2 Research programmes

1.2.1 In order to respond appropriately to demographic change, decision-makers at EU, national, and local levels need to carry out a detailed study of demographic developments. The first European Demographic Forum, which took place in October 2006, was an excellent initiative and should become a regular event.

1.2.2 It is equally necessary to scrutinise demographic change (the geography of population, natural mobility, migration, gender and age profile, increased life expectancy, etc.) and its causes (economic, social, cultural and environmental factors, difficulties in reconciling family and professional life, the situation of women and mothers in the labour market, flexible working arrangements for family reasons, the magnitude of job pressures and insecurity…) whilst taking national and regional diversity into consideration. It is essential that these studies should be carried out independently because their results may challenge national policies.

1.2.3 Comparative studies could be carried out to look into the different tax or social systems used to help women and men get back to work after raising children, and incentives for men to share family responsibilities. It would also be interesting to study the various tax incentives for developing universally accessible family-oriented public or private services.

1.2.4 Families in specific circumstances (single mothers raising children, children with disabilities, dependent elderly parents, migrant families having difficulty integrating etc.) should be the focus of specific studies.

1.2.5 Ageing (1), in all its forms and many geographic variations, should be the focus of specific studies, with particular emphasis on its impact on family life and policy. This policy has primarily been analysed from the perspective of relationships

(1) In demographic science, ‘population ageing’ is defined as an increase in the percentage of elderly persons in the population, generally accompanied by a drop in the percentage of young people. The expression ‘ageing society/gerontogrowth’ (gerontozoßómacs) is used to define an increase in the number of elderly persons. Depending on the country and the region, population ageing and ‘gerontogrowth’ are not necessarily concomitant, but may differ in terms of relative combinations and causes.
between parents, young children and adolescents. It should now be analysed from the perspective of relationships between children and elderly parents, with the emphasis on managing working hours and community support.

1.2.6 In the future it will also be necessary to consider how more active, independent and healthier older workers can be better involved in family, economic and social life for longer. More specifically, this could be achieved by adapting jobs and promoting greater active involvement in their communities, and relations between the generations (for instance, by involving older people in schools, nurseries or crèches). Families are not made up exclusively of parents and children, they also include grandparents, who often play an important role in helping and supporting the family (childminding, material support etc.).

1.2.7 In the Seventh framework programme of the European Community for research, technological development and demonstration activities (2007-2013), the socio-economic research aspect should be beefed up, with more funding provided to strengthen demographic research.

1.3 Information

1.3.1 The Commission should set up a European register on best practice in family policy, family-work balancing, gender equality and policies focusing on mothers and fathers who assume their full share of family responsibilities. Its purpose would be to recommend successful initiatives from all over Europe to the Member States in order to enable couples to satisfy their unfulfilled wish to have children (the number of children per household is 1.5, whereas the most recent studies indicate that people would like to have far more children).

1.4 Proposals

1.4.1 The impact of demographic change can only be substantially reduced through the timely implementation of a series of coordinated social, economic, environmental, family and gender policy measures. This means keeping the broader picture in mind and having the right policy mix. In this context, the European Union should present a pluriannual action plan proposing measures which have proved their practical worth in the Member States as a basis for family oriented and family-work balance policies.

1.4.2 Given that in the case of demography long-term policies are required, the EU should acknowledge the urgency of the situation and recommend measures for sustainable family policies to the Member States.

1.4.3 The open method of coordination should be developed as a means of benchmarking family, gender, economic and social policies, enabling the European Union to pick the best out of Member States' diversity and cultural wealth and national policies.

1.4.4 As a strong measure, the European Council, the European Parliament and the Commission should encourage the Member States — with due regard to the subsidiarity principle — to sign a European Pact for the Family, which could include the following commitments:

— an affirmation of Member States’ desire to pursue policies that meet people's expectations regarding how many children they would like to have per couple in the EU. These policies should be put into practice by such means as direct financial support, changes in taxation, and the provision of economically viable public or private facilities (e.g. crèches of various kinds, including company or inter-company crèches) all-day schooling and services; thus, it is the quality of facilities that matters, not the quantity;

— a plan to establish a fixed threshold for public funding for family- and child-related policies — i.e. investments in the future — so that available resources are not, potentially, subsumed in the overall costs of an ageing society — costs which an ageing electorate may consider a top priority;

— a guarantee to promote an environment which is favourable to families, mothers, fathers and children, putting into practice an idea that is not new: i.e. reconciling family life and work by ensuring genuine gender equality, by taking proper account of changes in living and working methods (irregular hours, distances, high housing prices in city centres, lack of infrastructures for infants, etc.);

— ongoing and sustainable measures to support children and families — because the long-term stability of these policies is the key to their success. Such measures should keep spending on youth policy steady in relative terms when set against the health and pension costs that are inevitably set to rise as the population ages. It is of crucial importance to generate demographic renewal under the best possible conditions. This means safeguarding and improving the health and safety of children; providing quality education for all; proposing assistance and support systems enabling...
parents to meet their needs and difficulties. Special attention should be paid to families and children living in extreme poverty, those needing specific support, and those from migrant backgrounds. Although the EESC acknowledges the ageing of the European population and believes that demographic renewal is essential for the survival of the continent, it points out that a reduction in widespread unemployment, access to lasting employment for 25-35 year-olds and real job security in general should make it possible to finance retirement (whether active or not).

1.4.5 Human beings are not just producers and consumers. They have a social and emotional dimension that constitutes their dignity. All genuinely humanist policies should not only take this essential dimension of humanity into consideration, they should safeguard it. Family policies play a full role in personal fulfilment and social harmony. By adopting a 'European Pact for the Family', the European Union would be demonstrating its commitment to the European Charter of Fundamental Rights.

2. Introduction

2.1 Following up on its Green Paper on Confronting demographic change: a new solidarity between the generations (1), the Commission has recently published a new Communication entitled The demographic future of Europe — From challenge to opportunity, thus demonstrating the importance it attaches to this decisive question for the European Union's future.

2.2 It must be said that until the Treaty of Nice, Member States were relatively silent on this issue despite the fact that, for two decades, demographers had been trying to draw the attention of politicians to the impending 'demographic winter' and the difficulties it would create. We cannot but deplore the fact that the response has been so slow despite ample and reiterated warnings, and that we are now faced with a full-scale demographic crisis.

2.3 Over the last twelve years, the Commission has unceasingly emphasised the importance of this phenomenon, which could render the goals of the Lisbon Strategy null and void. In so doing, the Commission has shown laudable lucidity.

2.4 Indeed, without wishing to appear unduly pessimistic, although the fertility rate is not the only condition for growth in the Member States and has to be backed up by skills development, training and creativity for all generations, the EU's demographic situation remains a major challenge for its future economic development and its social balance.

2.5 The lack of skilled manpower may limit the scope for productivity growth if insufficient attention is paid to the quality of work and modernisation of work practices. In effect, future jobs and the professional skills they require will be different from today's, underscoring the importance of lifelong learning. Unfortunately, there are some 17 million unemployed people in the EU, not to mention those who have to work part-time because they cannot find full-time employment. One of the EU's major challenges is to help these people find stable employment which, to a certain extent, would help to reduce the negative economic impact of the shrinking working population in Europe.

2.6 Demographic change comes after what is known in demographic terms as 'demographic transition'. The latter involved a substantially reduced mortality rate, especially in infancy and during child birth. This phenomenon is accompanied by a drop in the birth rate proportionate to the drop in mortality and a substantial increase in life expectancy at birth.

2.7 The demographic transition and increased life expectancy for senior citizens (since 1970 in Europe), are extremely positive developments. Nevertheless, demographic renewal must be ensured so that the balance between the birth and death rates is not disrupted in the long term, which is not the case in Europe. Indeed, in many Member States, the number of deaths exceeds the number of births.

2.8 Reaching an advanced age in the best possible conditions is a valuable asset that will continue to be an objective in the future. This trend will lead to a rise in health and welfare costs. However, it will also necessitate the establishment of new services and goods for the elderly. It will also entail the development of the working population's productivity and prolong the active life of senior citizens, who are sometimes excluded from the labour force against their will.

2.9 Immigration partially compensates and will doubtless continue to compensate for the demographic deficit on condition that integration programmes are provided for migrants (language and vocational training ... ) (2). Nevertheless, this cannot be our sole response to the demographic challenge because it is not just a matter of maintaining a labour force large enough to meet Europe's needs; it is also a human and societal issue. Moreover, depriving developing countries of their human resources — especially their most highly trained and qualified resources — cannot be an option. The European Union must also find its own home-grown solutions to the demographic challenges it faces.


(2) See EESC opinion of 13.9.2006 on 'Immigration in the EU and integration policies: cooperation between regional and local governments and civil society organisations', rapporteur: Mr Paríza Castaños (OJ C 318, 23.12.2006).
3. The October 2006 Communication from the Commission

3.1 The Commission opens its Communication by recalling a point that is often neglected in the surrounding debate: there is an aspect of demographic ageing, the demographic term for which is ‘top-down ageing’, that is good news, because it is a sign of increased life expectancy in the elderly, and hence, of significant medical, social and economic progress.

3.2 This increased longevity has been accompanied by a sharp drop in Europe's birth rate. Europe's demographic situation is therefore characterised by four elements:

— increased life expectancy,
— low average number of children per woman (1.5 children for EU-25),
— the decline in birth rates in recent decades,
— major migration inflows.

3.3 As a result, the EU population may drop slightly but, above all, it will age substantially as the post-war baby-boomers approach retirement age.

3.4 Commission projections go up to the year 2050 and are based, by definition, on statistical estimates. The Commission believes that these projections should be used as a tool for raising awareness and promoting debate.

3.5 According to the Commission's projections, by 2050 there could be two people of working age for each person aged 65 or above in the EU; whereas today the ratio stands at four people of working age for each person aged 65 or above.

3.6 Basing itself on these projections, the Commission is forced to conclude that demographic ageing could have a strong impact on the labour market, productivity and economic growth as well as social security and public finances.

3.7 In the short-term, employment rates for women and workers aged 55 to 64 could rise (until approximately 2017). However this will only offer temporary respite after which the full burden of demographic change would bear down on economic growth.

3.8 Thus, the average annual growth rate in GDP for EU-25 could fall in strict correlation with demographic ageing from 2.4 % over the period 2004-2010 to only 1.2 % between 2030 and 2050; this would put an end to the aspirations and goals of the Lisbon Strategy.

3.9 At the same time, if nothing is done, ageing could lead to a significant increase in public spending (pensions, healthcare and services for the elderly), which by creating budget deficits would lead to an intolerable spiral of debt.

3.10 The Commission believes that in the face of these anticipated difficulties, the question remains how to devise EU support for its Member States as part of a long-term strategy, the implementation of which, in law and practice, essentially depends on their political will and competences.

3.11 It thus proposes guidelines for debate and action which are relevant, but fairly vague and general, insofar as these issues fall within the remit of the Member States, or even the local authorities.

3.12 The proposals set out impact on family policy in order to promote demographic renewal by improving methods for reconciling professional, private and family life (by developing childcare facilities, parental leave, improving flexible work arrangements, and holding an annual European demographic forum).

3.13 The Commission also recommends measures to raise the employment rate for workers over 55 and productivity in Europe. It also envisages measures for organising legal immigration and the integration of legal immigrants.

3.14 Finally, the Commission proposes the emergence of a sufficient variety of financial instruments to safeguard pension schemes, which should include the building up of private savings and capital, so that individuals can have more autonomy in determining the level of income they wish to have at their disposal during their retirement, which presupposes efficient and transparent financial markets and effective supervision, especially of pension funds.

3.15 Ageing in Europe will lead us to change our mindsets as well as our social security systems and family policies because this is indeed a matter of turning a difficult challenge into an opportunity.

3.16 Since the European Union does not have specific responsibility for the issue under consideration, the Commission had no alternative but to restrict itself to setting out general principles. For this reason, we are at a loss to understand how the European Union is to acquire the relevant operational remit. The solutions vary according to the specific situation of each State and the social customs and traditions of the populations concerned. In addition, the practical implementation of certain measures, for instance the development of childcare facilities, can only be managed by the local authorities nearest the families. However, in no way does this alter the need and urgency for EU action to meet the demographic challenge.
3.17 The German presidency, which had expressed its interest in the Commission Communication, felt that a more-in-depth analysis of family policy was necessary and called on the European Economic and Social Committee to study to what extent a sustainable family policy might be able to contribute to economic and social development in Europe.

4. The family — a human reality that has adapted to economic and social change

4.1 Over the last two centuries, economic and social change in Europe has also impacted on the family, lifestyles and value systems. Industrialisation and urbanisation have changed the family framework. The extended family has been reduced and new variations on family life have evolved, the bond between the generations has changed, mentalities have evolved and economic solidarity has evolved or died out. At the same time, women’s growing financial independence has raised the standard of living of two-income families.

4.2 Family life has changed and become more diverse. Marriages are fewer and occur later in life. More children are born outside marriage, and the number of adoptions, especially of non-European children, has risen. The divorce rate has gone up, as has the number of new families with children from a previous marriage. The number of single parents, usually women, has gone up and these ‘single-parent families’ often find themselves in financial difficulty. Families raising children with disabilities face specific difficulties that deserve special attention from the public authorities. New family networks have evolved whereby mutual assistance is based on solidarity and the bonds of friendship (family crèches for instance). Households are made up of fewer members and a growing number of people and couples live alone and without children. The issue of elderly couples, their role in society and the support they will need will present itself more and more acutely. Immigration has introduced new family cultures to Europe thereby adding to the complexity of family situations.

4.3 In a predominantly rural society, the family was held together by three elements: affection, finance and geography. In practice, economic activities were usually carried out where the family was based: the farm, workshop, business. The unity created by these three elements died out or disappeared with the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation. In most cases, the family base is distinct from the workplace. Family members do not work in the same establishments or economic sectors. Parents are less present in the home. Grandparents and siblings often live far away and family solidarity is not as systematic. As a result, some children are often left to their own devices but, on the other hand, most also continue to live at home much longer than they used to, mainly because they prolong their studies and have difficulty finding their first job. It is not uncommon in some Member States to come across young adults in their thirties who are still living with their parents and continue to depend on them financially. It has also been observed that a higher number of children currently benefit from health, social and educational services than in the past.

4.4 Whereas today the ties of affection remain, as they have always been, the foundation of the family, it is clear that the financial and geographical aspects have become the exception (farms, traditional businesses, crafts …) rather than the rule.

4.5 Contemporary life has become more complex and undoubtedly individualistic. The values of individual competitiveness have become a very important goal, but all too often they tend to win out over values of solidarity.

4.6 Despite economic change, urbanisation, and the primacy of the individual over the community, the family has survived, and adapted, despite being undermined. Indeed, it corresponds to a natural and fundamental human aspiration for affection, love, mutual assistance, and solidarity. In addition, surveys carried out on the population and young people in particular show that this aspiration persists.

4.7 Nevertheless, it is manifestly clear that one of the major challenges is to make professional, private and family life possible and compatible for women as well as men, and to respond to growing parental responsibilities.

4.8 By their very nature, economic and social developments in European society have raised several vital issues for family policy: raising and educating children; assisting and supporting elderly parents, who may well be very elderly and dependent; flexible working arrangements; parental leave and leave to take care of a sick relative; support in getting back to work for parents who have interrupted their careers to raise the children; assistance or educational support for children — our societies’ future hope; combating poverty and unemployment; supporting families suffering the consequences of illness, alcoholism or other harmful dependencies (drugs, smoking etc.); fighting domestic violence; and providing support for families that include members with a disability.

4.9 Concrete and effective measures are called for in order to avoid creating excessive pressure on young people of parenting age. Asking women to have children, a career, and increase their presence at work implies providing the necessary means to reconcile motherhood and family life with their jobs. It is also appropriate to develop strong and effective measures to encourage fathers to involve themselves in family environment This also implies developing labour laws that would enable parents of small children, including men, to take parental leave and work flexible hours in order to look after their children in Member States which still lack such provisions.
5. The family — a reality the European Union has already recognised and proclaimed in its human, economic and social aspects

5.1 The European Union has already formally recognised its concern for the family. Indeed, Article 33(1) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights stipulates that: ‘The family shall enjoy legal, economic and social protection’. This wording implies that the family, the economy and social organisation are not unrelated or totally independent realities. On the contrary, they interact with each other and it is the Member States’ responsibility to ensure the legal, social and economic protection of the family.

5.2 In this respect, the Charter of Fundamental Rights echoes a much older text, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations and, in particular, Article 16(3) thereof, which states that: ‘The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State’.

5.3 Moreover, the European Charter goes a step further in Article 33(2), wherein it states that it is an objective of the Union in this field to ‘reconcile family and professional life’.

5.4 Thus, the European Union, in its definitive text on its fundamental values, not only emphasises that it considers family and professional life to be particularly important but also states that they must not be, or should not be, in conflict with each other.

5.5 Finally, it is worth noting that Article 33 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights affirms that the European Union has a role to play in family policy, at least in promoting, alerting and informing Member States and even urging them to coordinate in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity.

5.6 Recognising that the family is an economic unit does not mean reducing it solely to its economic role or focusing on numbers alone. Ultimately, the family and the economy work side by side for the common good, for the wellbeing of the individual as well as emotional stability (5).

6. The family — a source of economic prosperity, social solidarity and emotional stability

6.1 As everyone knows, the three post-war decades of massive economic growth were also a period of strong demographic growth and this was no coincidence. It is essential that this demographic dynamism should replace Europe’s demographic winter, and complement skills development, creativity and self-fulfilment for all generations, whilst respecting the environment and the planet’s ecological health.

6.2 The family is a fundamental economic unit and its links with the economy are natural. The family, as a unit, has needs that take on an economic dimension in several respects: food, housing, facilities, access to culture and leisure, clean air and water quality, etc. In some Member States, the family is also a source of income transfer and social services. It is clearly a driving force for the economy, insofar as family members have decent, sustainable purchasing power.

6.3 Furthermore, the family contains ingredients that promote economic development and social balance in at least four specific ways.

— The family is a hub of emotional, economic and social solidarity which, for many people, makes it easier to deal with the vicissitudes of economic life. When the unemployed can benefit from family, psychological and/or financial support, they find it easier to take steps to find a job, training programme or even set up a business, although this does not alter the fact that unemployment places a heavy burden on the entire family.

— The family is a direct economic driver because it is the source of what economists describe as ‘human capital’. Hence, parents must get all the support they need to raise their children. The real cost of Europe’s ‘demographic winter’ can be felt when we consider the difficulties ahead in terms of funding pensions, rural depopulation and the consequent disappearance of economic activities and difficulties in providing public services, fewer students in sunrise industries. Investment in human capital will boost productivity and economic growth, and help us deal with the above-mentioned developments in a lasting way.

— We should also stress the contribution the family makes to ‘human capital’ through the education and values it imparts and the support and stimulus the parents provide for their children. Qualities that will be crucial to professional as well as social life are acquired in the family: respect for others, making an effort, team spirit, tolerance, social behaviour, responsible independence, etc.

— Finally, it can be said that the family is a long-term economic driver, as parents use their economic resources to meet the family’s needs. Parental responsibility to educate and prepare children for the future contributes towards saving and investment in terms of money, real estate, training and knowledge. Parents will also take steps to reduce pollution from all sources in order to preserve a decent environment for their children. Most children nowadays receive from their parents and society considerably

(5) See the EESC exploratory opinion on ‘The economic and budgetary impact of ageing populations’, adopted at the plenary session of 14 March 2007, rapporteur Ms Florio.
more capital in the form of care, education, health and social services and property investment (and many also in the form of inheritance) than their parents or grandparents in their time. This is why the demographer Alfred Sauvy claimed that 'the child is an active element in society'. In this context, it introduces a historical dimension to a person's life at an economic, social and emotional level.

6.5 As early as the Renaissance, Jean Bodin wrote that 'The only wealth is man'. All EU Member States recognise the family's positive contribution in human, economic and social terms, not to mention emotional stability. This is why they all, in some way or other, implement family policies. Ultimately, they know that their nations’ future lies with their children.

7. Family policies — albeit varied — throughout the European Union

7.1 Family policies are implemented throughout the EU to ensure gender equality and reconcile professional, social and family life. These three aspects are linked and form an integral whole even if different countries emphasise one aspect more than another. Be that as it may, implicit or explicit, strong or weak, these policies exist in all Member States.

7.2 The underlying reasons vary. They are sometimes moral or civic, sometimes economic or political. Nevertheless, the psychological, physical and educational wellbeing of the child is always one of the fundamental aspects of family policies, as is the need to enable parents to fulfil themselves whilst juggling their family, professional and social lives.

7.3 Ensuring gender equality in professional life as well as family responsibilities are at the heart of certain family policies, especially in the Scandinavian countries. Indeed, in a context where the workplace may be far from the home and career breaks are not always accepted or understood by businesses, measures to reconcile professional and family life are among the keys to a family policy that enables us to embrace children as part of society.

7.4 The willingness to ensure equal opportunities for children may also contribute to family policies. The purpose, in many cases, is also to compensate for the economic constraints and burdens arising from family responsibilities. This includes a range of measures to deal with the difficulties encountered by fathers and, above all, mothers in the labour market, who most often bear the responsibility for childrearing, especially in the early years of childhood.

7.5 In other cases, the issue is approached from a social rather than family angle, the aim being to redistribute income in order to combat poverty, but without always linking this policy to the idea of offsetting specific family-related burdens.

7.6 Lastly, some policies have been more obviously intended to boost the birth rate, explicitly anticipating the need to reinvigorate births in a Europe, where too few children are being born.

7.7 All studies carried out in Europe on the relation between birth rates and high female employment show that a better composite fertility index is an obvious consequence of the ability to reconcile family commitments with work. Greater success in raising the fertility rate might be achieved through measures encouraging fathers with young children to better share family responsibilities with mothers. This is an important aspect which should be emphasised to the younger generations.

7.8 Longer life expectancy and training for young people, as well as training periods throughout our lives, have changed and will continue to change the way we organise our working and family life. It would be worth considering how to make training and working life more flexible in order to make it easier for people who wish to start a family to do so without having to give up their careers.

8. Measures to support the family and promote equality of opportunity for men and women in the workplace

8.1 In practice, the broad lines for the main policy measures for families are direct financial aid and free or subsidised childcare services (crèches, nurseries, childminder networks). Care will have to be taken to ensure that these measures facilitate reconciling working and family life. It is equally important for nursery services to be open to all and affordable for all.

8.2 Certain policies focus on childcare infrastructure, attractive opportunities for parental leave for educational purposes and a proactive policy aimed at reconciling remunerated activities and family life as well as facilitating a return to work after parental leave.

8.3 Others focus on tax relief for single-income families and benefits for parents who remain at home during the first few years of their children’s lives.
8.4 Some countries provide financial aid to compensate for the cost of educating children and measures for reconciling professional life with parental responsibilities, mainly through parental leave and free childcare facilities and nursery schools. This combination of financial aid and services to families appears effective.

8.5 Gender equality in the context of family responsibility and reconciling family and professional life are clearly very important to revitalising European families. This goes hand in hand with the need to eliminate the structural causes of unequal pay for men and women, mainly linked with the fact that all too often women alone are responsible for their children’s care and upbringing.

8.6 Achieving gender equality and balance — in line with personal aspirations, preferences and talents — with regard to earning a living, sharing parental, family and household responsibilities, participating in political activities or other activities of general interest is extremely important for demography and the birth rate. Most women, like men, quite rightfully want a job, children and the opportunity to participate in the social fabric.

8.7 There is a general tendency throughout Europe to postpone parenthood. This is not without its consequences for fertility despite modern medicine and public health research making it possible to reduce the risk of infertility in older women. Late pregnancies are largely due to the fact that people are studying for longer. However, it is also due to the fact that couples expect to have sufficiently stable and remunerated employment before they will consider having children. In this respect, youth unemployment and job insecurity, especially for women, is bound to have a negative impact on fertility and family life. Generally speaking, the European framework for economic and social life, whereby young people come by stable jobs increasingly late in life and the working population is encouraged to retire from fixed employment increasingly early, and young people’s new lifestyles are not conducive to assuming family responsibilities and having children.

8.8 In order to improve these situations and achieve equality between men and women, family policy measures must be combined with gender equality measures. By this we mean, for instance, quality childcare facilities, including company nurseries, as well as legal, fiscal and social measures to enable women, as well as men, to reconcile their parental, professional and social lives. It would also be appropriate to consider to what extent grandparents who are still working might be able to work flexible hours so that they can spend time with their grandchildren. If we do not succeed, there is a grave risk that women will continue to give up children and family life in order to focus exclusively on having a career.

8.9 It is equally important to ensure that the policies implemented make it easier to choose to return to paid work following a career break to have a baby or raise small children. In this respect, vocational training for people on parental leave is one avenue that should be explored, alongside flexible working hours making it possible to raise children. In this spirit, the option to work part time should be encouraged without making a return to full time employment more difficult when there is no further need for part time employment. Finally, we must ensure that when people return to work after taking parental leave, they are not placed in jobs below their skills levels. The fact that employees may have been granted parental leave quite recently should not count against them in the event of economic redundancies.

8.10 It is important for public services and companies, which have a duty to be ‘civic-minded’, to implement or promote social policies, practices and innovations to make working life easier for couples who are expecting or bringing up children. This goes beyond words and legislation. It is also a matter of general and psychological attitudes whereby children are not perceived as hindrances and parents are not seen as less productive or ‘competitive’. Initiatives currently being taken to set up company crèches or crèches shared by companies in the same area should be encouraged. They provide an invaluable service for couples with professional commitments as well as reducing the need to travel and simplifying their time management.

8.11 It is important to ensure that the public and private sectors do not misunderstand the problems that fathers of small children may encounter in their careers when it comes to taking parental leave or working shorter hours for family reasons. The public and private sectors should create the necessary conditions for fathers to look after their children. The social partners have an important role to play in this regard.

8.12 In general, fathers must be encouraged to take on a real share of all aspects of family responsibility, and especially upbringing. Many sociological studies show that the father’s ‘absence’ is the cause of increased difficulties in raising children.

8.13 Thus, the policies implemented, or to be implemented, vary, the difficulties encountered are different, but the objectives are the same: making it possible for men and women who want to start a family to do so. Nevertheless, all surveys show that Europeans are not able to fulfil their wish to have children and the often-expressed desire for a third child frequently goes unfulfilled. This is often for financial or material reasons or due to difficulties in balancing a career with family life, especially for mothers.
8.14 There are also less materialistic reasons. The European Union, although among the most developed parts of the world and the richest, is going through a period of background concern. Three decades of prosperity have been followed by economic uncertainty, concerns relating to environmental degradation and climate change, certain negative consequences of globalisation, the complexity of modern society and the public’s loss of faith in their governments’ ability to impact on events. This has given rise to widespread pessimism in Europe, which is not conducive to having children. For the first time in a long time, parents in many European countries feel unable to promise their children a better future.

8.15 It is also worth considering whether the dominant culture favours the family and having children, whether the image of having a successful family life and having children is sufficiently valued, whether individualism and a certain materialistic consumerism have not made us forget that the human being is undoubtedly an individual but an individual designed to live in a community. Hence, the deepest and most pressing concerns of Europeans relate to family life: education, housing, job opportunities, emotional stability and self-fulfilment. Perhaps the priority should be to take an optimistic and generous view of family life because when we broach the subject of family and having children, we are, by definition, touching on the most intimate aspects of being human. The public authorities, whose responsibility it is to ensure the common good, must therefore create opportunities and provide today’s men and women with genuine freedom to start a family and have as many children as they like, without interfering with people’s personal life choices.

8.16 Families are a source of economic prosperity, especially when both parents can be gainfully employed. They are also a source of social solidarity. The EU should therefore encourage the Member States to incorporate the family dimension in its economic and social policies. The EU should use best practice to promote a sustainable family policy.


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