

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'The role of the social partners in reconciling working, family and private life'

(2007/C 256/19)

On 13 February 2007, the European Economic and Social Committee received a letter from the upcoming Portuguese Council presidency asking it to draw up an exploratory opinion on *The role of the social partners in reconciling working, family and private life*.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 18 June 2007. The rapporteur was Mr Clever.

At its 437th plenary session, held on 11 and 12 July 2007 (meeting of 11 July), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 145 votes in favour, with four abstentions:

1. Background

1.1 Under the Lisbon strategy, the European heads of state or government resolved to increase the proportion of women in employment to 60 % by 2010. This objective was confirmed in the integrated guidelines (Guideline No 17), which were adopted as a key element of the new Lisbon strategy steering mechanism in 2005.

1.2 The Lisbon strategy will achieve its ambitious objectives for growth, employment and competitiveness more rapidly and on a more sustainable basis if, despite the demographic decline in the working-age population, successful moves are made to further increase the number of people in employment in the EU over the next ten years and to improve their skills. There is a good chance of achieving both these objectives by considerably increasing the number of women in work, since the upcoming generation of young women has a keener interest in pursuing a career and is also much better educated. It is vital to eliminate any remaining obstacles on this front.

1.3 To that end, the EU Member States agreed, among other things, on the following:

- resolute action to increase female participation and reduce gender gaps in employment, unemployment and pay; and
- better reconciliation of work and private life and the provision of accessible and affordable childcare facilities and care for other dependants (Guideline No 18).

1.4 The Portuguese Council presidency has asked the European Economic and Social Committee to draw up an exploratory opinion on the role of the social partners in reconciling working, family and private life.

1.5 The European social partners believe that reconciling working, family and private life makes a key contribution to economic growth, prosperity and competitiveness in Europe.

1.6 Reconciling working, family and private life is also one of the priorities identified by the European Commission in the *Roadmap for equality between women and men* adopted in March 2006⁽¹⁾. In this roadmap, the Commission mentions three issues of key importance for the better reconciliation of working, family and private life:

1. flexible working arrangements for both women and men;
2. increased care services;
3. better reconciliation policies for both women and men.

1.7 On 12 October 2006, the European Commission published a communication — already announced in the roadmap — entitled *The demographic future of Europe — from challenge to opportunity*, thereby launching a first-stage consultation of social partners on reconciling working, family and private life under Article 138 of the EC Treaty.

1.8 In the first part of the consultation, the Commission stresses the importance of reconciling working, family and private life. It is essential to increase the female participation rate, particularly against the backdrop of demographic change and the resultant pressure on social security systems. Emphasis is also placed on the role of reconciliation policies in achieving the Commission's Lisbon goals.

1.9 In their responses to the Commission, the European social partners underline the importance of reconciling work and family life, especially given the continued underrepresentation of women on the labour market and an increasingly ageing population. They explicitly back implementation of the goals for extending childcare set by the European Council in Barcelona in 2002. The social partners also agree that the three issues of key importance identified in the *Roadmap for equality between women and men* can be useful in achieving the objectives at hand. Moreover, the social partners stress that reconciling working, family and private life and the issue of equal opportunities for women

⁽¹⁾ COM(2006) 92 final.

and men at the workplace must take centre stage in the political debate, especially in the light of demographic trends. In that regard, particular attention must also be paid to eliminating existing gender-role stereotypes, since, unless these change, progress will be difficult.

1.10 In a bid to improve equal opportunities for women and men at the workplace, the social partners (BUSINESSEUROPE/UEAPME, CEEP und ETUC) ⁽²⁾ in 2005 adopted the *Framework of Actions on Gender Equality* ⁽³⁾. Reconciling family life and work is also explicitly included in the four core areas on which the national social partners are to take action by 2010. The Council of Ministers is therefore right in its desire to assign the question of working time organisation — which is of such key importance for reconciling family life and work — to the social partners in a bid to identify practical solutions for all concerned.

1.11 By helping improve working conditions, the social partners can also help to improve families' lives. In that regard, they have a key role to play. The *Framework of Actions on Gender Equality* is one way in which the social partners are playing a part in implementing the Lisbon strategy. Given that the causes of the continuing imbalances on labour markets are complex and interlinked, the European social partners are convinced that, to promote gender equality, an integrated strategy is needed for any successful resolution of the issues involved. Reconciling family and working life is one of the most important elements in achieving that goal.

1.12 Some companies have stepped up their commitment to reconciling family and working life in recent years, so that a family-friendly approach has become an integral component of their staffing policy and corporate philosophy, as is reflected in the first joint follow-up report on the social partner agreement published by the social partners in February 2007. Companies, the social partners and the Member States must nonetheless continue to work to eliminate those shortcomings that are still in evidence ⁽⁴⁾.

1.13 Equal opportunities at the workplace, initiatives to help reconcile family and working life, and 'equal opportunities employers' as a management model are elements of the CSR concept, which encourages companies to engage in best practices and act accordingly in the interests of their employees.

⁽²⁾ BUSINESSEUROPE (formerly UNICE) is the umbrella organisation for European employers' and industrial confederations. UEAPME is the European association of craft, small and medium-sized enterprises. CEEP is the centre of enterprises with public participation, while the ETUC is the European Trade Union Confederation.

⁽³⁾ http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/news/2005/mar/gender_equality_en.pdf.

⁽⁴⁾ See the EESC exploratory opinion of 14 March 2007 on the *Economic and budgetary impact of ageing populations*, rapporteur: Ms Florio (OJ C 161, 13.7.2007).

2. The current state of play

2.1 Social change has resulted in the emergence of a wide range of different family structures. A policy aimed at reconciling working, family and private life must take account of all existing ways of life (e.g. one-parent families, blended families, single people, divorced parents, adoptive parents, working students, same-sex partnerships and people who live alone). The growing number of older and very old people is also increasing the need for care services both inside and outside the family.

2.2 Alongside their job, women are still more closely involved in the organisation of home and family than men and thus find themselves frequently stressed and constantly overworked. This is particularly true of women farmers and women who are self-employed. In such circumstances, women often feel obliged to work part-time at lower pay with poorer pension provision and poorer promotion prospects. Reconciling family and working life is thus also a key tool in achieving workplace equality both between women and men and also between women with children and women without.

2.3 Precisely because the underlying issues — and the options available for resolving them — vary not only from Member State to Member State, but also from region to region and indeed from company to company, there are no catch-all solutions that would apply across the board. In this regard, the Committee feels that the social partners also have a key role to play in resolving the issues to be faced. Able, as they are, to draw on the requisite structures in the individual Member States, the social partners, through their commitment to helping reconcile family life and work, can have a critical impact on workers' everyday lives.

2.4 Although the decision to have, or not to have, children is a basically private matter, as is the decision to provide care and attendance within the family for relatives or other particularly close individuals in case of illness, disability or old age, the effects of those decisions are also felt by society as a whole. The legacy of the falling birth rate will be a future shortage of skilled workers and managers, customers, employees, business people, scientists and researchers, thereby adversely affecting the whole of society ⁽⁵⁾. The state should therefore bear particular responsibility in the following areas:

— material and financial support (benefit payments, recognition of relevant factors in pension calculations);

⁽⁵⁾ On that point, see the EESC's exploratory opinion of 14 March 2007 on *The family and demographic change*, rapporteur: Mr Buffetaut (OJ C 161, 13.7.2007).

- supportive infrastructure (childcare, full-day schools, out-of-school and school-holiday care facilities and leisure programmes offered by volunteer organisations, help facilities, for instance for outpatient care services);
- adequate parental leave for mothers and fathers (including in case of adoption); and
- a family-friendly work environment.

2.5 The Commission feels that flexible working time arrangements are important in order to use the full potential of the workforce. It follows then that such arrangements must be equally available to women and men. A legal framework is helpful in this regard. That said, the fact that take-up of such arrangements is far more widespread among women than among men generates a gender imbalance that has a negative impact on the position of women at the workplace and on their economic independence. More than in the past, therefore, men should be encouraged to shoulder family responsibilities, above all through incentives to take parental and paternal leave so as to share with women the burden of unpaid household chores and the care of children and relatives fairly and in a spirit of partnership.

3. Role models

3.1 As a corollary of social change, women have become much more highly skilled — and their role models and aspirations have also evolved accordingly. Young women in Europe today are better qualified than young men and see a career as an integral part of their life plan. The fact that women are becoming more highly skilled should also mean a narrowing of the gap in average pay between women and men. The current pay differentials are to a great extent the result of the high number of women who work part-time or have interrupted their career for a relatively long period thus cutting the length of their professional experience; they are also the result of the lower percentage of women in management positions and lower skills levels among older women. Although collectively agreed pay scales in particular provide a guarantee that women and men with similar qualifications receive equal pay for equal work, wage inequality still persists. Moreover, genuine freedom of lifestyle choice will exist only if the social parameters are such that women and men have the opportunity to structure their lives as they see fit without having to face a positive or negative value judgement from society because of it.

3.2 Lifestyle choice is to a large extent determined not only by the availability of appropriate childcare provision within a particular country, but also by social attitudes both to working mothers and to fathers who choose to look after the family. The views of the social partners on these issues also have a pivotal

influence on social attitudes. Experience in the Scandinavian countries and in Germany has shown that it may be useful to introduce a provision whereby families receive certain financial allowances (a proportion of child benefit, for instance) — or receive them at a higher rate — only on condition that the father also takes a certain amount of time out to look after his child. This gives fathers a legal framework, making it easier for them to devote a set period of time to bringing up their children, while mothers also benefit from the opportunity to rejoin the workforce earlier.

3.3 The Committee stresses that adjusting individual elements will not be enough to make a difference to working women facing dual strain as they try to reconcile family, working and private commitments. Rather, the goal must be a fundamental revamp of the way in which unpaid, non-job-related work such as bringing up children, caring for relatives and organising domestic chores is shared between men and women. Men must be encouraged to share such tasks in a genuine spirit of partnership. This requires a radical change in thinking and structure.

4. Social-partner support for reconciling working, family and private life at company level

4.1 Demographic developments and the changes these involve have major implications for workers and employers alike. The social partners at all levels play a key role in making it easier to reconcile working, family and private life.

4.2 A staffing policy that takes account of — and ensures a fair balance between — work-related interests and the basic outside responsibilities, family commitments and private concerns of each member of staff (both male and female), is the basis for a successful corporate strategy to promote work-life balance. For that to succeed, the individual Member States also have to provide the following basic parameters:

- good childcare infrastructure — both for infants and for growing children — which covers existing needs;
- a sufficient quantity and high standard of care and attendance provision for older people and people with a disability;
- fair working time arrangements;
- measures to ensure that periods of leave or part-time work to care for children or dependent relatives do not affect future entitlements; and
- skilled staff working for fair pay.

Universal infrastructure provision benefits workers, businesses, the state and society in equal measure.

4.3 Staff-related measures that can be deployed in companies — some of which have also been agreed among the social partners — include:

- the introduction of working time arrangements which are innovative but not disadvantageous (fragmentation of working time, doing several small jobs), teleworking, sabbaticals and working time accounts;
- the legal security of a stable employment contract;
- schemes giving staff the opportunity to keep in touch with work during parental leave;
- support in arranging childcare, such as the setting-up of in-house crèches, the purchase of childcare places and financial assistance;
- support in looking after older relatives or family members requiring care;
- support for personal development; and
- support for reintegration into employment after leave or part-time work to care for children or dependent relatives.

4.4 Such moves also help in the objective of facilitating the reconciliation of working, family and private life for all concerned through customised and highly flexible part-time working arrangements designed to benefit companies and workers alike. This goal is not served where part-time work is not the result of a free choice. The Committee believes it is urgently necessary for more male workers to work part-time if family needs oblige one parent to do so. They can thus show in practice that, in a partnership and in the family, non-work obligations are not the task of women alone, but should be shared in a responsible way and exercised together as a team.

4.5 The social partners can help to resolve the issue of how parents can actually live out their chosen life plan. Some companies operate voluntary schemes for mothers during parental leave, giving them the opportunity to stay in touch with work by standing in for colleagues who are on holiday or off sick. Such schemes — and others such as extending invitations to company social functions — have proved useful in helping mothers get back to work after taking a career break for family reasons. The Committee notes that the provisions in place to protect pregnant women and fathers and mothers on parental leave must be stringently complied with and must not be circumvented through indirect discrimination.

4.6 Parents may also benefit from support with the organisation of childcare. Various companies offer their employees help in finding childminders and crèche places, and emergency care when children fall ill. Some companies also deploy targeted measures to encourage male employees to shoulder family commitments and spend more time with their children, for instance by giving them a day's leave on their child's birthday. Such companies deserve backing. However, in most cases, support to parents is lacking. Companies behaving in this way — particularly where they act unlawfully — inflict damage on themselves as such practices adversely affect the working environment and staff motivation.

4.7 The Committee would draw attention to studies carried out by *Prognos AG* which found that measures designed specifically to promote staff's legitimate interests — including those relating to family and private life — do make business sense as such measures reduce absenteeism and boost staff loyalty, motivation and performance. Staff policies of this kind also make jobs more attractive, particularly when they also make it easier for female workers with family commitments to secure — and retain — promotions. Such a corporate culture makes for a good working environment and is a positive factor in boosting a region's profile as a business destination.

4.8 The Committee points out that, when introducing flexible working time models, consideration should also be given to the flexicurity approach. In the context of the Lisbon strategy, flexicurity offers an integrated approach to labour market reform, facilitating the necessary or desirable flexibilities while at the same time combining these with the requisite degree of security and planning certainty for all concerned. Flexibility negotiated between the social partners must aim to secure a win-win situation for companies and employees alike. Companies' need to adjust to market requirements is taken into account, as is the increasing desire of workers for greater flexibility in areas such as working time, thereby enabling them to better accommodate family commitments or other non-work private interests, while retaining security and avoiding insecure employment conditions. Individual solutions are required that reflect actual need; these should as a rule be negotiated between the social partners. The Committee would stress that, in the flexicurity debate, more attention needs to be paid to the differing impact on men and women ⁽⁶⁾.

4.9 The goal of reconciling working, family and private life is all the more achievable where stakeholders are actually able to draw on the requisite tools in the real-life working environment. The utmost importance must therefore be attached to national-level implementation.

⁽⁶⁾ On that point, see the EESC's exploratory opinion of 12 July 2007 on *Flexicurity (internal flexibility dimension — collective bargaining and the role of social dialogue as instruments for regulating and reforming labour markets, Rapporteur: Mr Janson (OJ C 97, 28.4.2007)*.

4.10 The Committee considers that business competitions, backed by the social partners, can be a good way of raising the public profile of family- and women-friendly practices and of putting such practices forward as examples for others to follow. Such competitions bring innovative tools to the attention of the broader public, including:

- playroom provision for staff children;
- in-house nursery schools; and
- company-based networks to coordinate voluntary services 'between the generations', whereby, for instance, retired members of staff run administrative errands or see to the shopping for young colleagues with family commitments.

4.11 Understandably, the large number of small and medium-sized enterprises, which make up the bulk of EU firms, do not have the resources to make such attractive offers, and for this reason specific tax incentives should be considered. However, the closer social contacts that are a particular feature of SMEs facilitate agreement among those concerned on practical and prompt solutions tailored to the needs of the individual staff member. Moreover, several small businesses operating in the same region can also join forces with the local authorities, in conjunction with the public and non-governmental organisations, to offer a shared package of measures, thereby raising their own profile and boosting their region as a business destination.

5. Practical initiatives at regional and local level

5.1 To make practical and realistic improvements to the basic parameters designed to secure the more effective reconciliation of working, family and private life, it is particularly helpful if the various local players involved can agree on a coordinated strategy. The Committee would therefore encourage the social partners to launch regional-level and local-level initiatives, bringing together committed players (businesses, works councils, parents' groups, faith-based communities, sports clubs, local representatives etc.) in towns and local communities to coordinate local parameters in such a way as to secure the most effective possible reconciliation of working, family and private life. Changes at local level are of immediate and practical benefit for all concerned. The various local players are involved in a wide range of activities and are open to all kinds of creative ideas. Here are some examples, to which others could readily be added:

- the establishment of a municipal website providing targeted information for families;
- the establishment of databanks for the allocation of child-care places;

- contact points bringing together young families without grandparents and older people without families;
- child supervision to and from school;
- support for volunteer organisations and volunteers who look after children in their spare time;
- workshops on family-friendly urban development to stop young families moving away;
- mentoring programmes for fathers working part-time;
- revision of school bus timetables to make it easier for parents to coordinate the start of the working day with the start of the school day;
- more flexible nursery school opening times;
- company events on the work-family balance at which companies present their family-friendly staffing policy to the public; and
- a check on all local government decisions to ensure they are sufficiently child-friendly.

6. Childcare facilities and care of elderly relatives

6.1 The Committee notes the point made in the European Commission's second progress report on the implementation of the Lisbon strategy submitted in mid-December 2006 ⁽⁷⁾ that the availability of affordable child care is a problem in a number of Member States. Member States are therefore called upon to increase the availability of universally accessible, quality child-care in line with their own national targets.

6.2 Moreover, the 2002 Barcelona European Council ⁽⁸⁾ resolved that, by 2010, childcare should be provided in the Member States to at least 90 % of children between three years old and the mandatory school age, and to at least 33 % of children under three years of age.

6.3 Given the changed roles of women and men, it is particularly important that the social partners make perfectly clear that a child's development does not suffer because its mother works or its father looks after the family.

⁽⁷⁾ COM(2006) 816 final: Communication from the Commission to the Spring European Council, Implementing the renewed Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs 'A year of delivery'.

⁽⁸⁾ Presidency conclusions: Barcelona European Council, 15 and 16 March 2002.

6.4 Given the wide variation in childcare provision for under-threes in the individual Member States, the Committee urges that each Member State should lay down a specific care target for children in this category. To make it possible to reconcile work and family life, a place at a nursery or with a qualified childminder should be available for at least 33 % of all children under three by 2010.

6.5 The Committee considers it vital that greater importance be attached than in the past to expanding childcare provision in the EU Member States, and that appropriate political measures be put in place to further accelerate and support this process.

6.6 In its opinion on *The family and demographic change* ⁽⁹⁾, the Committee thoroughly examined demographic change in the European Union and its repercussions for families. Increasing life expectancy may mean a better quality life for many people. But it will also mean a future in which more and more people will have to provide care for older relatives alongside their job commitments. Accordingly, greater emphasis should be placed on expanding care services to help to relieve the burden on family carers.

6.7 The task of the social partners on this issue can be to provide information on tools that have proved effective in prac-

tice. These might, for instance, include working time arrangements that can be changed at short notice to allow carers respond to any sudden emergencies; workplaces adapted to carers' needs, i.e. where employees can be reached by telephone and have access to computers and the internet to help sort out any care issues that may arise; and the provision of documentation on organisational, financial and legal aspects of care.

7. Next steps

7.1 The EESC considers that reconciling working and family life is necessarily linked with the achievement of gender equality. The objectives of the social partners in this area, when achieved, underpin this reconciliation. For the reconciliation of working and family life to become an everyday reality, it should be presented as normal and necessary in education programmes aimed at young children.

7.2 The Committee asks the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission to take account of and support the proposals set out in this exploratory opinion in their future work in order to further improve moves to reconcile working, family and private life in Europe.

Brussels, 11 July 2007.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS

⁽⁹⁾ On that point, see the EESC's exploratory opinion of 14 March 2007 on *The family and demographic change* Rapporteur: Mr Buffetaut (OJ C 161, 13.7.2007).